



Norms of disagreement for (economists as) expert advisors

Joe Roussos
Institute for Futures Studies
Stockholm

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Background

Expertise in crises, 2023-2025 funded by Swedish Research Council

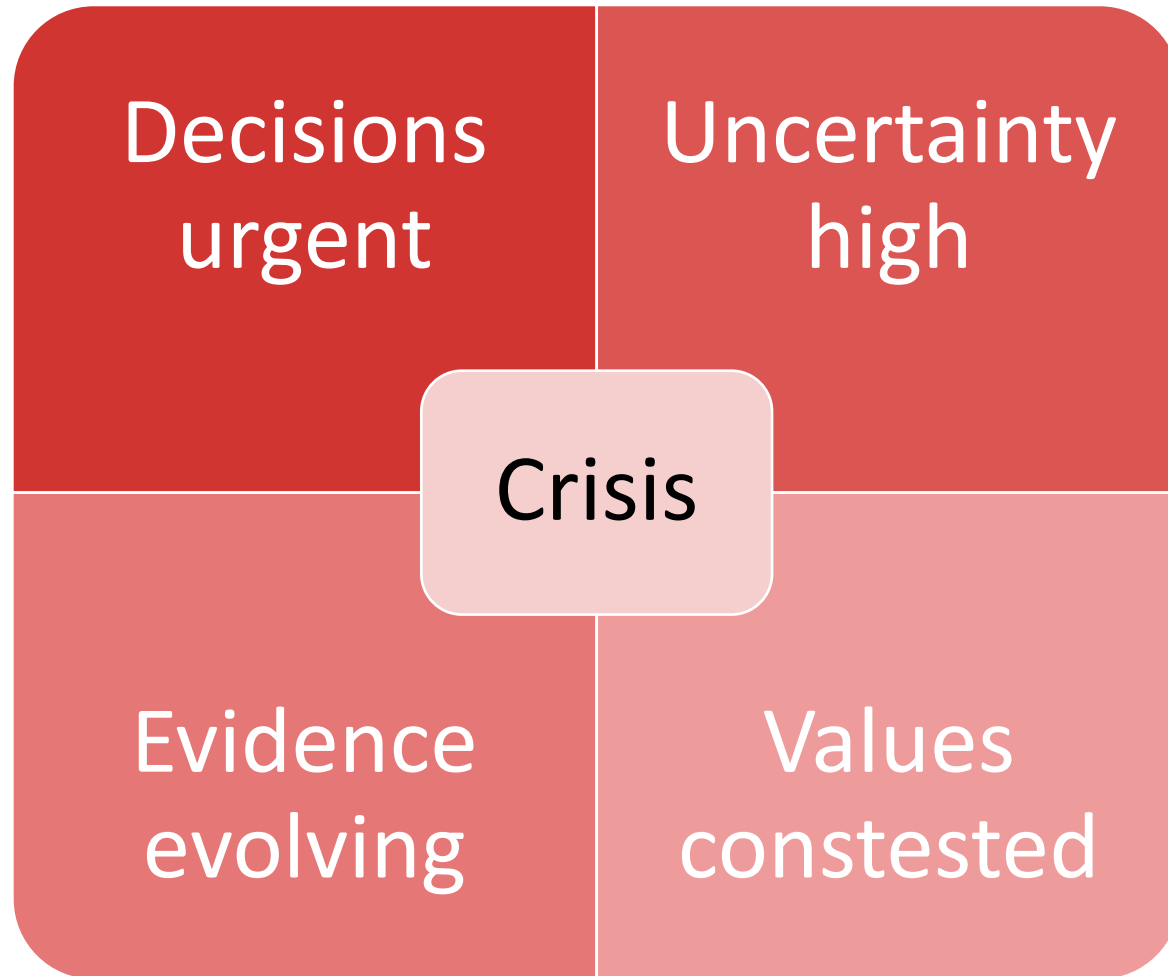
Focus: role of experts as advisors to policymakers in times of crisis

Inspired by covid-19 but forward-looking and normative

Today: first look at an argument about expert disagreement

Target: **characteristics of a good advisor re managing disagreement**

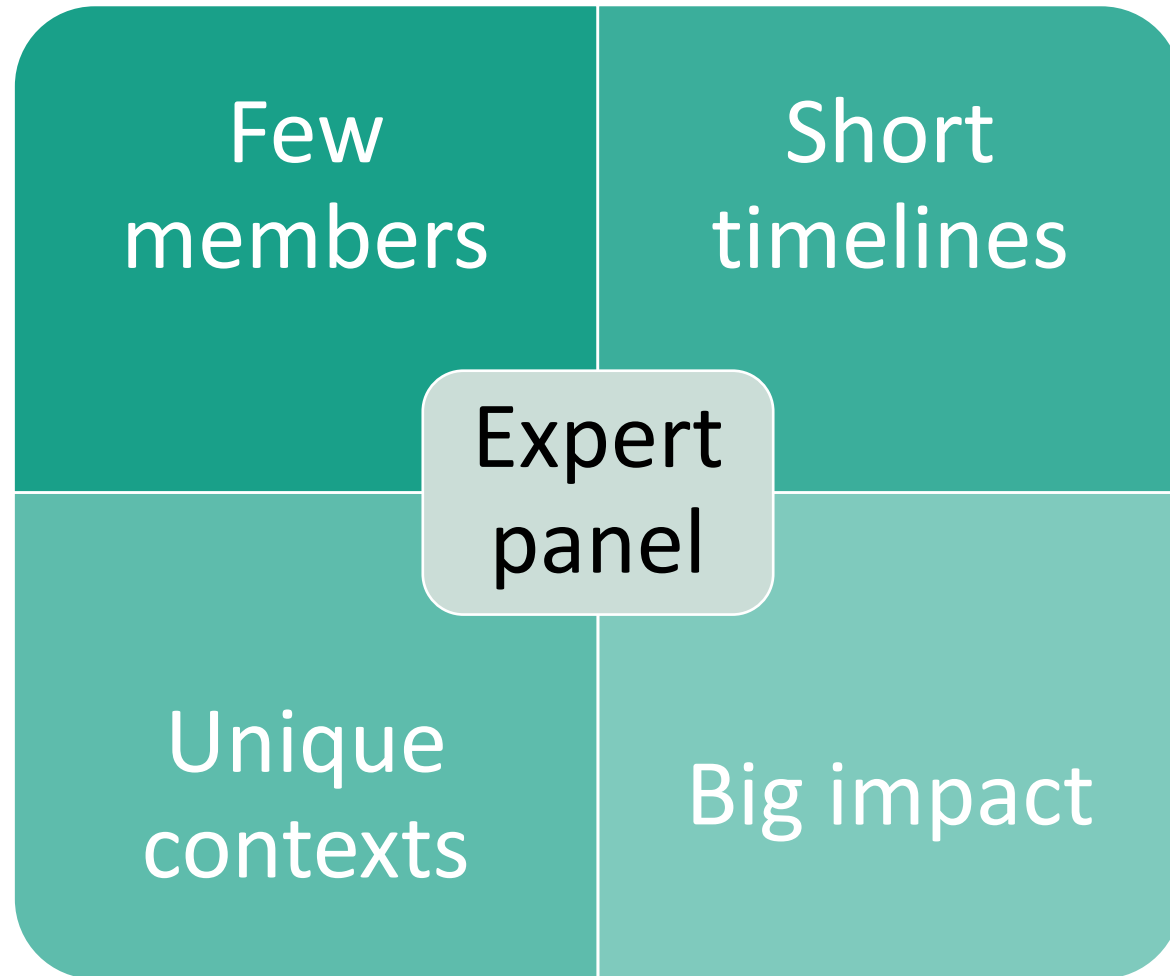
This talk has a specific focus



Examples

- 2007-8 global financial crisis
- Russian invasion of Ukraine
- Natural catastrophes
- **The covid-19 pandemic**

...and specifically on expert panels during crises



Examples

- NY Fed's economic advisory panel
- Florida Commission on HLPM
- UK's SAGE

Large differences in British and



Our Mission

UnHerd

Log in

The Post

Opin
Why epidemiologists and economists keep

arguing over

OPINION

PETER COY

Economists and Epidemiologists Need to Get Along

When epidemic
& economy, lots
disagreement.

NOAH FELDMAN 3 April

Nov. 19, 2021

We should this expect disagreement!

- Uncertainty is a part of crisis: limited information, changing science
- Policy problems cross disciplinary boundaries, seldom match off-the-shelf science
- Nature of advising: asked about action, which blends facts and values in ways that can be hard to discern and articulate

...the question is how to manage it

My focus: how experts themselves respond

Scenario:

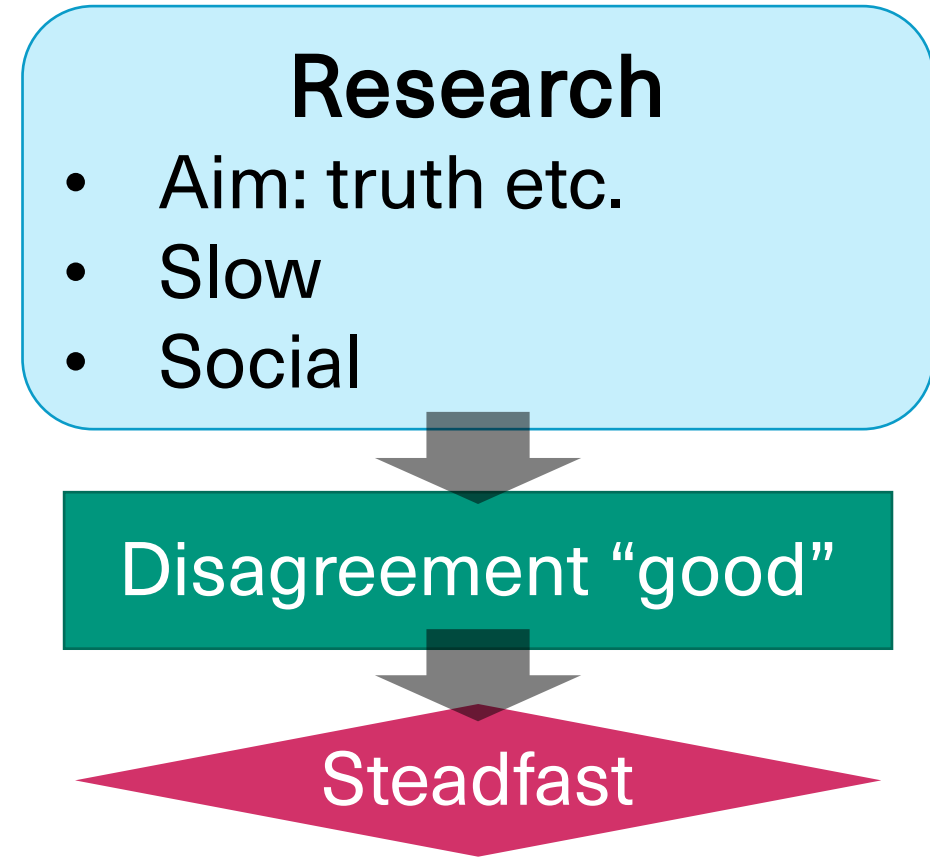
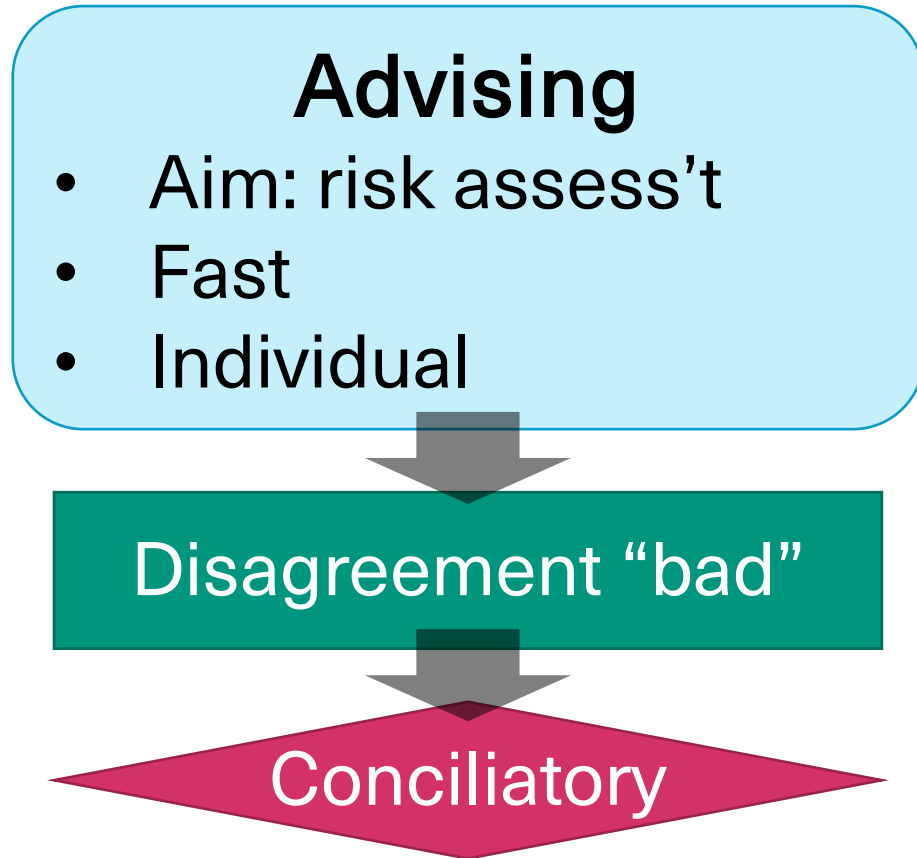
- You are an expert on an advisory panel during a crisis
- Aim: to advise policymakers on urgent decision
- You disagree with another panellist
- Possibly an expert in your field (e.g., you are both economists)
- Possibly an expert in another field (e.g., economist vs. epidemiologist)

What should you do?

Questions

1. What are you trying to do? What are you asked to do?
2. How should you respond to disagreement?
3. Is that different to what you would normally do?
4. What's the best way to get it to happen?

Overview of the argument



What do we make of this contrast?

1. Policy advising

What do policymakers want from experts?

- Crisis policymaking is **decision making under severe uncertainty**, where the DM supplies (only) values/preferences
- **Epistemic goal**: to gain reliable, high-quality information as basis for decision
 - Desired product: best scientific perspective on the problem
- **Non-epistemic**: to comply with rules, to provide cover, to bolster a pre-existing position,...
- They therefore face two challenges:
 - Identifying reliable expertise **vs. Pseudo-experts**
 - Eliciting the desired product **Individual/factional views**

2. Disagreement

Hypothesis: expert advisors should be

Humble

Communicative

Conciliatory

Humble... but helpful

Personal

- Awareness of limits
 - Commitments, biases
- Wary about epistemic trespassing
- Sensitive to overconfidence

- ...BUT still grappling with the policy problem as it really is rather than attempting to reduce it to a narrow disciplinary problem

Inter-personal

- Recognising others' expertise (and their limits)
- Disagreement as likely to imply private information/skill as it is to imply error
- Collaborative not territorial

Communicative

- Policymaking involves decisions under uncertainty
- Making them requires first **grasping the uncertainty that exists**
- Aim of the panel process is to **surface and communicate current information**
 - Contrast: research aims to gather evidence, deliberate, theorise
- There are pressures against this (cf. Pielke 2007)
 - Politicians often ask for definitive answers, simple guidance
 - Experts often feel that policymakers are ill-equipped to handle uncertainty
 - These pressures hamper optimal decision making

Conciliatory

- Now we come to the disagreement itself...
- “Conciliation” is a generic name for a kind of adjustment in light of another’s opinion. Includes averaging, imprecision, etc.
- E.g., Epidemiologists’ estimates of R: 2.4, 2.6 -> Range [2.4-2.6]
- E.g., Epi say “lockdown due to X predicted health outcome”
Econ say “don’t lockdown due to Y predicted economic outcome”
-> suspend judgement on policy, defer on others’ expertise, adopt conciliatory belief

Why conciliate?

- Consequence of the foregoing
- Context: limited time, no new research, multiple disciplines
- **Humble**: accept that each participant brings private information, disciplinary expertise, and skill
- **Communicative**: focus on the goal of expressing existing uncertainty to support policy decision
- Therefore, conciliate: **take disagreement seriously and adjust one's own position**
- Then work on panel task: to communicate current state of science, e.g., range of reasonable perspectives, highlighting sources of disagreement/uncertainty where possible

Objection: communication not belief change

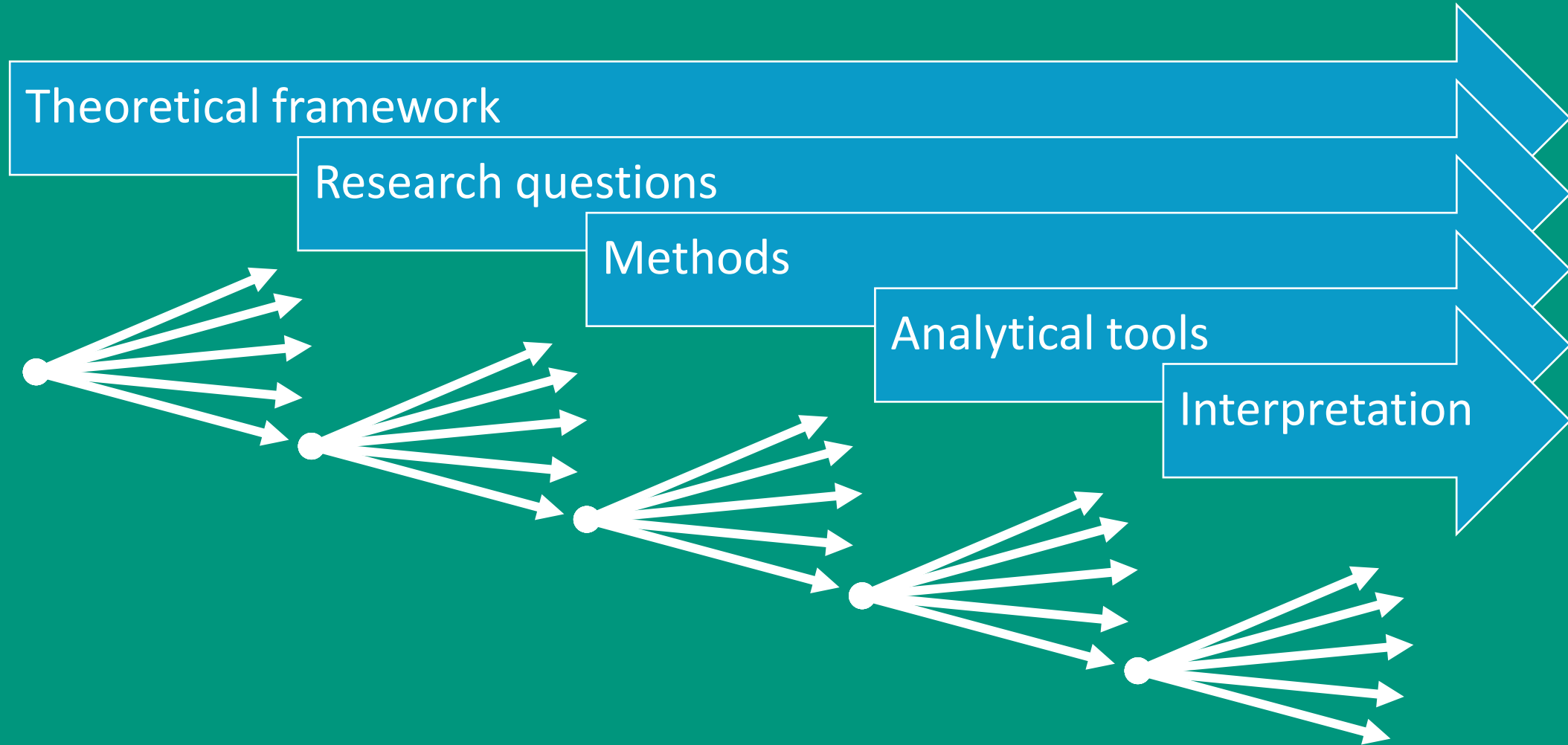
- The goal of the panel is to **communicate information** to the policymaker
- For this, they need not alter beliefs, they simply need to communicate the uncertainty amongst them: their different predictions, explanations, etc.
- Responses
 - **Conciliation informs how one deliberates.** It reflect taking one's interlocutors seriously, acknowledging their private information and skill. Steadfast panellists are less likely to participate meaningfully in crafting useful messages (wrt the goals of the panel process)
 - We also want their **input to the panel to represent the uncertainty in their field**, and a conciliatory attitude—prior to the panel—facilitates this goal

3. Research

The context of research

- Much more familiar to us!
- Some notable features...
- **Epistemic goals**: aims at true theories and explanations, useful models, the provision of understanding, etc
- **Institutional context**: takes place in universities, institutes, etc. which have other goals (e.g., education) and ancillary purposes (e.g., constituting the profession of academia)
- **Personal goals**: to produce good research, to win grants, to be promoted, to crush their rivals, etc.

Disagreement abounds in research



How should researchers navigate this?

Claim: the research scientist should cultivate a certain stubbornness, an insensitivity to disagreement, in order to succeed

- Deliberation is slow and (evidently) unsuccessful—beliefs must be formed and choices made in the face of disagreement
- Recall that conciliation and steadfastness are initial responses to disagreement, before deliberation/discussion
- Conciliation would undermine Kitcher's valuable diversity, by collapsing it prematurely
 - A community of conciliatory scientists would converge quickly on Middle-of-the-road opinions / Maximally uncertain opinions

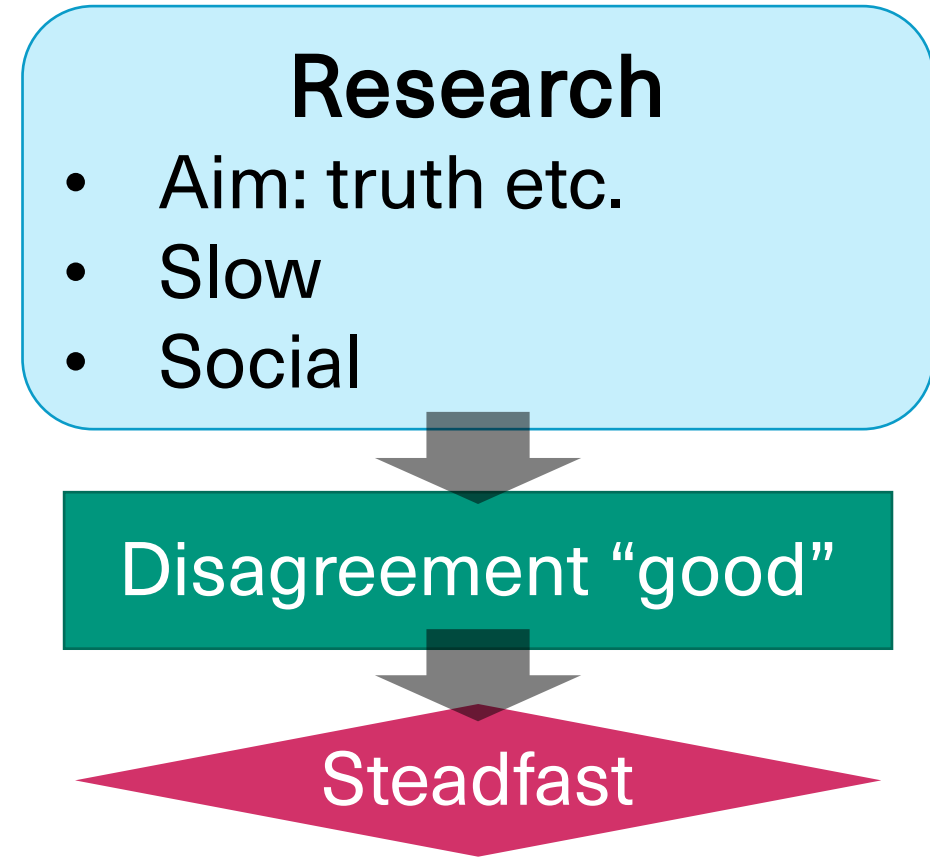
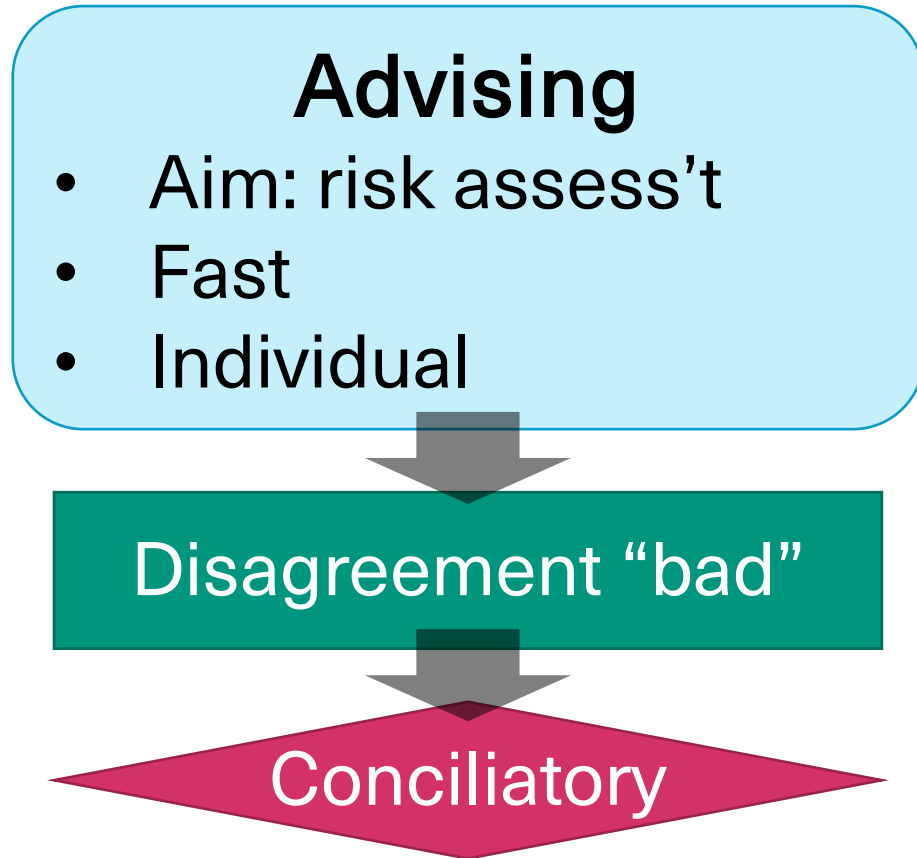
Clarification

- I advocate for
 - Not artificially curtailing disagreement during the research process
 - Agreeing to disagree
 - Stubbornness in the face of higher-order evidence, i.e., disagreement
- I am not arguing for
 - Disagreeableness
 - Hostility
 - Stubbornness in the face of first-order evidence

...on the epistemic and practical grounds just described

4. Puzzle

The emerging puzzle



What do we make of this contrast?

How to navigate the puzzle

- Option 1: different individuals should be advisors
 - Don't choose “the best scientist” where that means researcher
 - The virtues are too different
 - Instead choose... what? Need additional criteria beyond these disagreement-relevant ones
- Option 2: experts must “code-switch”: researcher-mode vs advisor-mode

An argument in favour of option 1: different experts

- I argued that they should be conciliatory in the panel, but what about beforehand?
 1. Expert panels have only a few members
 2. Experts therefore represent whole fields/subfields/approaches
 3. More conciliatory individuals will have incoming beliefs which better represent their fields (though they will be worse researchers because of that)
 4. So, panels should be composed of more conciliatory individuals
- Additional reason: Habits die hard. Code-switching may be difficult. Conciliatory individuals therefore do better. (But: must be weighed against epistemic performance)

Conclusion

- In advising: conciliation is a better strategy
- In research: epistemic and institutional factors favour steadfastness in the face of disagreement

Upshots

1. Best researcher \neq best advisor
2. Researchers in public need to understand different norms

Open questions

- How to conciliate
- Whether to prefer code-switching or different advisors