Disagreements

Daniel Cohnitz · Teresa Marques

Abstract This special issue of *Erkenntnis* is devoted to the varieties of disagreement that arise in different areas of discourse, and the consequences we should draw from these disagreements, either concerning the subject matter and its objectivity, or concerning our own views about this subject matter if we learn, for example, that an epistemic peer disagrees with our view. In this introduction we sketch the background to the recent philosophical discussions of these questions, and the location occupied therein by the articles in this collection.

People agree and disagree about a lot of things: what happens around them, what to do, matters of taste, and, more generally, world views, values, policies, theories, philosophies, etc. Some disagreements appear to be "faultless"—no party in such a dispute need be mistaken. Other disagreements, seem to be "merely verbal", and perhaps not even disagreements at all. In both cases, philosophers have argued that this diagnosis should lead to deflationism about the subject-matter of the initial (apparent) disagreement. If disagreements about a certain subject matter are faultless, then there are no objective truths about that subject matter; if disagreements about a certain subject matter are merely verbal, then they concern a pseudo-problem. Still some other disagreements do not seem to involve what people explicitly believe or think about something, but rather what they are disposed to do.

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D. Cohnitz (✉)
Tartu, Estonia
e-mail: cohnitz@ut.ee

T. Marques
Lisbon, Portugal

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1 Merely Verbal Disagreements

Before investigating the implications of persistent disagreement, one might first want to consider whether there are perhaps different types of disagreements (that might imply different consequences). As we noted above already, the English word 'disagreement' seems to apply to a wider variety of things. Two (or more) persons might be said to "disagree" because they are engaged in a *dispute*, one vigorously denying and criticizing the views of the other. And this might happen even if both have mutually compatible beliefs about the subject matter of their dispute. Perhaps they do not recognize that their beliefs are actually compatible, or perhaps they are not aiming to assess the compatibility of their beliefs (maybe they want to move the other to adopt certain values or recognize certain standards). On the other hand, two persons might also be said to be disagreeing without engaging in any kind of dispute, i.e. without ever exchanging words, reasons or rhetoric. Perhaps one or both are already dead, or do not notice the disagreement, or do not care. But if their beliefs or statements are in some sense "incompatible", it seems correct to describe them to be in disagreement. One might try to introduce some clarification by distinguishing between "genuine disagreements" and "merely apparent disagreements". As we will see shortly, it will be notoriously hard to decide for certain kinds of disagreements in which category they should go.

A relatively unproblematic candidate—in this respect—seems to be the phenomenon of "merely verbal disagreements". The belittling 'merely' already indicates that these aren't supposed to be "real" or "genuine" disagreements. Consider William James's famous example:

> SOME YEARS AGO, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find every one engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel—a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: *Does the man go round the squirrel or not?* He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn threadbare. Every one had taken sides, and was obstinate; and the numbers on both sides were even.
> (James 1904: 31)

As James explains, the disagreement is wholly terminological. The correct answer depends on how you understand 'go round'. If you mean by it that the man is at

some point North, East, South, and West of the squirrel, he goes around it. If you mean that he is at some point in front, to the side and at the back of the squirrel, he does not go around it. Once these two notions of 'go round' have been distinguished, the disagreement disappears. Everyone in the camping party can agree on all the facts concerning the man and the squirrel. Understanding when disagreements are merely verbal is of potential metaphilosophical importance, as we will see below. At least *prima facie*, a merely verbal disagreement derives from some communicative mishap or other and so betrays nothing substantial or deep about the subject matter of the disagreement. If we had in our possession a sharp concept of merely verbal disagreements that would help us to detect them with greater perspicuity, we could reduce the risk of entanglement in pseudo-problems that slow our progress toward understanding the phenomenon.

In "Merely Verbal Disputes", Carrie Jenkins discusses recent metaphilosophical attempts to clarify the notion of a merely verbal dispute. Jenkins identifies three aspects of merely verbal disputes that are used in the literature to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for a dispute to count as merely verbal. One is the idea that the parties in a merely verbal dispute do not actually disagree about the facts of the matter. The second idea is that the parties to the dispute do not recognize this, and actually end up in the dispute because of a disagreement about language. Of course, there can be also non-verbal disagreements about language. But what is specific to merely verbal disputes is that they appear to be disputes about something other than the portion of language that is actually responsible for them.

A third aspect concerns the general resolvability of merely verbal disputes if the parties would adopt a neutral terminology. Jenkins argues that this aspect, which is sometimes used to diagnose a dispute as merely verbal, is not a necessary condition. This is because sometimes disputants do not have the required alternative vocabulary available to avoid ambiguity. Nor is it sufficient. The disputant might be irrational and not willing to resolve the issue by moving to the alternative vocabulary even if it were available to them. Jenkins suggests that the most promising characterization of 'merely verbal dispute' is

> MVD: Parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute iff they are engaged in a sincere prima facie dispute D, but do not disagree over the subject matter(s) of D, and merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language.

As Jenkins argues, though, what counts as a "merely verbal dispute" is dependent on the context of utterance. But likewise (and in the same way) what should be considered as the subject matter of a given dispute is also dependent on the context of utterance.

2 Can (Merely Verbal) Disagreements Justify Deflationism?

As we said above, it is tempting to think that once a dispute is diagnosed as merely verbal, this will lead immediately to deflationist consequences. After all, if a dispute is merely verbal, then the dispute was pointless—if the participants in the dispute

would just sort out their usage of language, there wouldn't be a substantial issue left for discussion. As Brendan Balcerak Jackson notes, logical positivists as well as some modern-day meta-ontologists agree that diagnosing a dispute as merely verbal, or the parties in the dispute as talking past each other, should lead to deflationism.

However, in his "Verbal Disputes and Substantiveness", Balcerak Jackson argues that merely diagnosing a dispute as having the kind of pragmatic defect which leads the parties to talk past each other does not by itself show that the question under dispute is not substantive. In order to derive deflationist consequences the meta-ontologist would need to endorse additional assumptions (for example, about the analyticity or truth-by-definition of certain sentences in the dispute), which should seem unattractive for post-positivist meta-ontologists.

Of course, the practicing metaphysicians should be troubled when learning that they have been merely talking past each other. But, as Balcerak Jackson argues, they aren't disagreeing about ultimately insubstantial matters, contrary to the logical positivist analysis. On that analysis, the disputants would merely be objecting to the constitutive meaning postulates of their opponent's conceptual frameworks.

Folke Tersman's "Disagreement: Ethics and Elsewhere" also discusses whether deflationist consequences follow if a certain type of disagreement is detected. Instead of verbal disputes, Tersman focuses on persistent disagreements about moral matters. Can the moral anti-realist argue from the presence of widespread disagreement about moral matters to the conclusion that there are no objective facts in the moral domain? One worry is that such an argument would overgenerate: if the presence of disagreements should lead to moral anti-realism, we should also be anti-realists about other areas that exhibit the same kinds of disagreements, such as epistemology and meta-ethics. However, anti-realism in those domains would seem to undermine the moral anti-realist's case. She seems likely to encounter trouble when she tries to claim coherently that her conclusion is *objectively* true.

Tersman argues for a conditional verdict on the matter. If the disagreements we find in science do not imply deflationist consequences (because in the sciences we find means for the rational resolution of disagreements), then the disagreements we find in epistemology and meta-ethics shouldn't imply such consequences either. This is both because the resolvability of epistemological disagreements explains the resolvability of scientific disagreements and because existing meta-ethical disagreements more plausibly derive from an ignorance of empirical fact than do many ethical disagreements.

3 Faultless Disagreements

There are also persistent disagreements in other areas; for instance in aesthetics, matters of taste, or about humour. And there is a further aspect of many disagreements in these areas. It seems that, in a high number of cases, it is legitimate for people to hold their position, not merely because they are not blameworthy, but because they are not wrong.

Persistent disagreements may be a sign of a lack of objectivity in an area of discourse—i.e. that truth in that area is mind-dependent. But where faultlessness

exists, it can been taken as a sign of lack of universality—i.e., that different, apparently incompatible, views are equally true. David Hume, discussing standards of taste, expresses this elegantly:

> On the contrary, a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. It only marks a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind; and if that conformity did not really exist, the sentiment could never possibly have being. Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. To seek in the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter. According to the disposition of the organs, the same object may be both sweet and bitter; and the proverb has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes. (Hume 1757:268-9)

Dispositional accounts of the properties expressed by predicates of personal taste elaborate the mind-dependence of the properties at stake. Contextualism can render a coherent semantic explanation for the expression of the "thousand different sentiments excited by the same object" and of faultlessness. A predicate like 'is tasty', uttered in context C, expresses properties such as *tasty for the perceivers relevant in context C under the perceptual circumstances relevant in C*, or simply *tasty for the standard relevant in C*. Different subjects can thus both speak truly if they don't share the same standard. So, contextualism can explain faultlessness. But can it explain the disagreement?

The main objection raised against contextualism is that it loses disagreement at the cost of explaining faultlessness. Two people do not disagree if one says 'Sara is short' and the other says 'Sara is not short', in virtue of one meaning 'short for a volleyball player' and the other meaning 'short for a Brazilian'. Likewise, two people cannot disagree when one says 'haggis is tasty' and the other says 'haggis is not tasty', and they mean different things by 'tasty'.

Andy Egan's "There's Something Funny about Comedy: A Case Study in Faultless Disagreement" illustrates this debate with the case of comedy, offering a relativist account that aims to secure faultless disagreements. He raises objections against contextualism similar to those sketched above. Egan further discusses some alternative explanations that contextualists have put forward to account for the impression of disagreement that remains, insisting that those explanations can handle intra-conversational disagreements, but not extra-conversational disagreements, nor cases of "disagreement in thought" where speakers do not verbalize their opinions at all.

Egan's alternative is to adopt a Lewisian conception of contents: the objects of belief are not possible world propositions, but *de se* propositions. A predicate like *x is funny* is to be analyzed as a dispositional property (some variation of *being somebody in whom x is disposed to cause R in circumstances C*). This preserves the

dispositional analysis that contextualism tried to capture. But if Lewis's centred proposition account is correct, then someone who thinks x is funny self-attributes the property *being disposed to have a response R to x in circumstances C*. Egan then argues that the *de se* account can underwrite four different things: disagreement in thought, faultlessness in thought, disagreement in communication, and faultlessness in communication. Faultlessness in thought is preserved because each person is (presumably) right in the self-ascription made. Disagreement in thought ought to be preserved too: If I self-ascribe the property *being disposed to laugh at Steve Carell*, I cannot also consistently self-ascribe the property *being disposed not to laugh at Steve Carell* (or something like it). The two properties are incompatible and so no one can consistently self-attribute both. The subjective incompatibility would yield disagreement. A problem for the *de se* account here is to explain why disagreement occurs about some *de se* properties, but not all (not about *having burning pants* or *being John Malkovitch*). A different issue concerns the communication of *de se* contents. The account of communication/assertion that Egan favours is Stalnaker's: treat the semantic content of a declarative sentence S in context c as its uptake conditions for assertions of S in c. A sentence like "Steve Carell is funny" has the content (let's assume) *being disposed to laugh at Steve Carell*, and an assertion of that sentence requires that the audience accept (self-attribute) its content. Again, not all *de se* propositions will work like this in communication. This predicts disagreement in conversation but it is not clear that it predicts faultlessness—each assertion is a defective conversational move when the interlocutor differs in dispositions. Egan's aim is to show how a theory that will underwrite the possibility of faultless disagreement can proceed.

Max Kölbel's paper, "Agreement and Communication", shows how the issues related to the possibility of faultless disagreements are central to theories on the content of speech acts and mental states, and hence to understanding communication and agreement. He considers two possible notions of agreement: agreement in content (when two people have beliefs, or make assertions, with the same content), and normative agreement (when two beliefs, or assertions, are such that if one is correct so is the other). Whether or not agreement in content coincides with normative agreement will depend on the particular theory of content that one chooses. A *straight* semantic theory would be one where the facts about normative agreement and disagreement amongst beliefs and assertions supervene on facts about the contents of those beliefs and assertions. On a straight theory, if it is correct "for someone at some time to believe such a content, then it is correct for anyone at any time to believe it." As Kölbel argues, de se beliefs and assertions provide a motivation to depart from straight semantics, as do those central to the discussion about faultless disagreement; for instance beliefs and assertions about what is epistemically possible. *De se* contents force us to say that either some contents are not portable, or that only a portable counterpart of them is portable. He suggests two alternative models of communication to replace the simple picture. According to the latter, communication consists in the transference of portable contents (the Stalnakerian conception of communication endorsed by Egan—see above—counts as a simple picture). The two alternatives Kölbel proposes are the *local portability* model and the *surrogate content* model. On the first model, contents are portable

relative to a class of locations, and on the second, what is portable is the surrogate content of the non-portable de se content.

Teresa Marques's paper, "Doxastic Disagreement", focuses on what Egan called "disagreement in thought". It compares the success of relativist solutions to contextualist ones in offering an explanation of faultless doxastic disagreement. She proposes a description of doxastic disagreement where the relevant attitudes are acceptance states and the contents centred propositions. But Marques argues that the condition for the incompatibility of attitudes offered by some relativists is unacceptable. For instance, Egan relies on a subjective notion of rationality— whether it would be rational for a subject to self-ascribe two distinct properties. Marques argues that this condition over generates, and that in its place we should adopt an inter-subjective notion of incompatibility: if one subject's attitude is correct, then another subject's attitude cannot be correct. This corresponds to the normative notions of agreement and disagreement described by Kölbel. On the notion of doxastic disagreement proposed, relativists face the same limitations as contextualists: faultlessness is accommodated at the cost of losing disagreement. Now, the notion of inter-subjective incompatibility presupposes an absolute conception of correctness, which can be questioned. Authors like MacFarlane (2007, ms) have suggested that there are not only different forms of disagreement but also that in some cases *correctness* is not absolute, but relative. The very same attitude (depending on the type of content that attitude has) can be correct as assessed from one context but incorrect as assessed from another. Where this is so, relativists can claim to secure not only faultlessness but also disagreement (in a sense). Marques argues, however, that the resulting conception turns disagreements into ultimately pointless conflicts, and is thus an unreasonable notion. Marques concludes by suggesting that the kind of disagreement that exists in the alleged cases of faultless disagreement are not doxastic disagreements at all. What would then need to be explored is whether the source of disagreement is the conflict of non-doxastic attitudes.

Torfinn Huvenes's paper, "Disagreement without Error" develops this idea. He argues that we can make sense of faultless disagreement without being committed to any form of relativism about truth. He suggests that disagreements result simply from conflicting attitudes, and that the attitudes at stake can be doxastic or not (whereas Marques contemplates the possibility of there being different *kinds* of disagreement, doxastic and non-doxastic). The disagreement at stake can thus result from the conflict of non-doxastic attitudes like preferences or desires. A case of conflict of non-doxastic attitudes would be one where one party approves of something another party does not approve. Huvenes claims that this account avoids some of the dilemmas that relativist accounts of faultless disagreements face: that once truth is relativized to perspectives, disagreement is lost; and that it is hard to reconcile the relativist account of faultless disagreement with plausible assumptions about the connection between the notions of truth and of error, by allowing bizarre ascriptions like 'what you are saying is false, but you are not making any mistake'. Huvenes's positive proposal is that we should explain the disagreement that results from the conflict of non-doxastic attitudes without attributing to either party in the dispute any error, i.e., false beliefs. He draws two lessons. The first is that we

shouldn't confuse arguments against relativist accounts of faultless disagreement with arguments against faultless disagreement. The latter can exist even if relativist accounts face problems. The second is that we shouldn't assume that faultless disagreements require a relativist account of truth.

4 Peer Disagreements

Learning that somebody disagrees with you might sometimes be important. Perhaps your interlocutor is right and you have been wrong all along. The significance of such a disagreement seems especially strong in case you find out that your views are in disagreement with the views of someone that you take to be equally well informed and equally as smart as you are. But what is the rational thing to do in such a case? Should it lower your confidence in your own view? Should you perhaps suspend judgment on the matter altogether, given that your epistemic equal is disagreeing with you?

Let's assume that peer disagreements should have revisionary consequences: if you learn that you and your epistemic peer disagree about whether F, then each should revise her own belief about whether F. Adam Carter shows in his "Disagreement, Relativism and Doxastic Revision", that such a principle presupposes a related principle about recognised epistemic peerhood, EP:

(EP) If A and B are recognised epistemic peers vis-à-vis F, then rationality requires that A and B think, *before* disagreeing about F, that each other is equally likely to be right about whether F.

It also seems that if you can disagree about something, then you can disagree about it with someone you should recognize, prior to the disagreement, as your epistemic peer. This, Carter argues, has important consequences for the relativist approach to faultless disagreements as discussed in the previous section. Remember that the relativist objects to the contextualist analysis of faultlessness on the ground that the contextualist loses a robust sense in which faultless disagreements are really *disagreements*. The relativist's own analysis is then supposed to "save" the disagreement. However, if that's right and disagreements are such that they can always obtain with recognised epistemic peers and have revisionary consequences, then it seems that the relativist must be able to make sense of (EP) for faultless disagreements, too. Carter argues though that the relativist cannot do that. I might recognise you as my epistemic peer. But, on the relativist account, that doesn't mean that I think you and I are equally likely getting things right. This is because the equality of our evidential situation doesn't entail an equality of standards, and for the relativist the latter is just as important for getting things right. But then, it seems, the relativists' "disagreements" can't play the social epistemological role played by genuine disagreements. So the truth-relativist has also failed to "save" the disagreement in faultless disagreements.

But let us come back to the issue of whether it is rational to revise your views in the light of peer disagreement, and if so, why and how it is. Let us first consider *how* you should revise your opinion. It seems clear that not all cases of peer

disagreement should lead you to revise your views. Let us look at an example that Katia Vavova discusses in her "Confidence, Evidence, and Disagreement":

> **Math.** For years now, you have been meeting six friends for dinner every fortnight. You always split the check evenly, tipping 18 % and rounding each person's share to the nearest dollar. The task of figuring out how much each person owes always falls on you and Smith. (You're the light drinkers in the group.) Upon receiving the check, you both do the requisite calculations in your head. Most of the time you agree. In the instances when you have disagreed, you have checked with a calculator and have been right equally often. Tonight you run the numbers and become quite confident that each share is $43. But then Smith announces that she is quite confident that each share is $44. Neither of you has had more wine or coffee, and you do not feel (nor does Smith appear) especially tired or especially perky.[1]

This is a case in which it might well be reasonable to revise at least the degree of confidence with which you believe that each share is $43. Now consider the case "Crazy Math" which is like the one just described, except that Smith says that your share is $385. This should give you no reason whatsoever to revise your opinion.

The two cases seem to suggest that how you should revise your opinion depends on your rational confidence in your opinion. If it is very high, you should stick to your guns and not revise. If your rational confidence in your opinion is low, however, you should reconsider. Since your confidence is high that your share is somewhere around $43 rather than somewhere around $385, you can ignore Smith's opinion in the "Crazy Math" example. Since your confidence of being right in the "Math" example is presumably lower, this should account for the difference between the two cases.

Surprisingly, as Vavova shows, such a principle is false. It is not generally the case that peer disagreement should lead us to revision in cases of low confidence, but should be ignored in cases of high confidence. On the contrary, the very factors that account for low confidence in our opinions will also make disagreement less significant. It's in the hard cases, in which we find it difficult to form an opinion, that we probably have already checked our thinking and thus do not need to revise any further when we learn about disagreeing peers. Peer disagreement, on the other hand, can be most significant in cases in which we are highly confident in our views.

Let us finally turn to the question: *why* should we revise our views at all in the light of peer disagreement? Under what conditions should learning that a peer is disagreeing with you about whether *F* lead you (and also, eventually, your peer) to suspend judgment about whether *F*? If the epistemic situation of you and your peer is, as far as you can tell, perfectly symmetric, but you nevertheless arrive at opposing judgments about whether *F*, it seems you should move your beliefs in the direction of your peer's. At least, as is argued by Jeroen de Ridder in his "Why Only Externalists Can Be Steadfast", this should hold under the following two conditions: you find yourself in the highly idealized epistemic situation in which you have no access to an internal symmetry breaker *and* you are an internalist about epistemic

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[1] The example is originally from Christensen 2007.

justification. If we take the notion of epistemic peerhood seriously, the conditions on epistemic peerhood should by themselves exclude the availability of symmetry breakers, i.e. the availability of reasons for thinking that your epistemic position is after all better than that of your peer, and that therefore it is rational to stick to your judgment. In such cases, de Ridder argues, internalists do not have the resources to justify a steadfast position. Externalists, on the other hand, may have such further resources. They might, for example, point to the fact that the one of the two peers who has evaluated her evidence for whether F correctly is in the stronger epistemic position. But then it is rational for her to stick to her guns even in the light of the internal appearance of perfect epistemic symmetry.

As de Ridder points out, however, the scenario of an ideal peer disagreement, which would exclude the availability of any internal symmetry breakers, is highly artificial. Because such cases are at best approximately realized in real-life disagreements, it might also be that internalists can in all real disagreements justify a steadfast response.

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