

Disagreement Without Error

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1 Introduction

When two people disagree, we tend to assume that someone is making a mistake. But perhaps that is not always the case. Perhaps there are cases of disagreement in which nobody is making a mistake. The possibility of cases of so-called ‘faultless disagreement’ has become a controversial topic in recent debates in philosophy of language. However, on both sides of the debate there has been a tendency to associate the idea of faultless disagreement with some form of relativism. The idea is that we can make sense of faultless disagreement if we accept that there is an interesting sense in which propositional truth is relative. Relativists like Kölbel (2002, 2004, 2009) and Lasersohn (2005) have claimed that this puts them in a position to deliver faultless disagreement. Furthermore, among those who reject the possibility of faultless disagreement, this rejection has often been tied to the rejection of relativism.

The main purpose of this paper is to show that the idea of faultless disagreement does not stand or fall with relativism. There is an alternative approach that is based on the idea that disagreement sometimes involves attitudes other than belief, such as desires or preferences. This means that there is an alternative way of making sense of cases of faultless disagreement that does not require any form of relativism about truth. Moreover, I will argue that this approach avoids some of the issues that a relativist account of faultless disagreement must confront. The overall message is that relativism is not the only option if we want to take the idea of faultless disagreement seriously. In fact, it might not even be the best option.

The plan is to discuss these issues on a fairly general level. What is at issue is whether relativism provides the only way of making sense of faultless disagreement, not whether it happens to be the case that relativism provides the right account of certain cases of faultless disagreement. That means that I am not going to discuss issues specifically having to do with predicates of taste or any other expressions that have been discussed in the debate about relativism.¹

In §2 I give an initial characterisation of faultless disagreement. In §3 I introduce a simple relativist account of faultless disagreement. §4 I present an alternative account of faultless disagreement in terms of attitudes other than belief. In §5 I argue that this alternative account avoids a problem that Rosenkranz (2008) has raised in connection with relativist accounts of faultless disagreement. In §6 I present another problem for relativist accounts of faultless disagreement due to Richard (2008) and Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009). In §7 I argue that an account of faultless disagreement in terms of attitudes other than belief also avoids this problem.

2 Faultless Disagreement

In this section, I am going to give an initial characterisation of faultless disagreement. A case of faultless disagreement is a case of disagreement in which neither party is wrong or making a mistake.² This is not just a matter of there being some sense in which the parties are epistemically blameless or not rationally criticisable. There is an important sense in which someone who believes something that is not true always counts as being wrong or having made a mistake. If I believe that Mary is in her office and it turns out that she is not there, I have made a mistake. That is true even if my belief is based on seemingly strong evidence. Perhaps I am not epistemically blameworthy in such a case, but I have still made a mistake.

In ordinary cases of disagreement, we tend to assume that someone must be making a mistake. For instance, let us suppose that Mary and John are

¹See Huvenes (2012) for a discussion of some related issues concerning disagreement and predicates of taste. While the idea that disagreement can involve attitudes other than belief plays an important role in that discussion, the discussion is not specifically concerned with faultless disagreement.

²I take this to be a fairly standard way of characterising faultless disagreement. See e.g. Wright (2006) for a similar characterisation of faultlessness.

engaged in a discussion about Russian literature. They are both sincere and they take the discussion seriously.

- (1) a. Mary: Dostoyevsky wrote *War and Peace*.
- b. John: No, he didn't. It was written by Tolstoy.

Insofar as Mary believes that Dostoyevsky wrote *War and Peace* and John believes that Dostoyevsky did not write *War and Peace*, it is clear that they disagree. However, there is no temptation to think that the disagreement is faultless. Since Dostoyevsky did not write *War and Peace*, Mary is making a mistake. But if she had been right, John would have been wrong. In a case like this, there is no room for faultlessness.

However, there are cases of disagreement that make the idea of faultless disagreement look more attractive. For instance, there has been a lot of the discussion about cases involving expressions like 'fun' and 'tasty', so-called 'predicates of taste'. The purpose of this paper is to look at ways of trying to make sense of the idea of faultless disagreement. It is not my goal to make any claims about alleged cases of faultless disagreement or even to argue that there are such cases. Having said that, it is still useful to have an example to work with. Let us therefore consider a case involving 'tasty'.

- (2) a. Mary: Haggis is tasty.
- b. John: No, it isn't. It's disgusting.

The reaction one is supposed to have is that Mary and John disagree, while being reluctant to say that either one of them is making a mistake. But as several commentators have pointed out, including Kölbel (2002, 2004) and Wright (2006), it turns out that it is not easy to maintain that attitude.

In order to see why this is problematic, let us assume that disagreement always involves conflicting beliefs. Two parties disagree only if there is a proposition p such that one party believes that p and the other party believes that not- p . This assumption will later be called into question, but for now the point is just to see where the argument takes us.

If we go along with these assumptions, it is hard to see how Mary and John could disagree without one of them having made a mistake. In order for Mary and John to disagree, there must be a proposition p such that one of them believes that p and the other believes that not- p . For instance, let us

suppose that Mary believes the proposition that haggis is tasty and that John believes the proposition that haggis is not tasty. But then it follows that one of them believes something that is not true. After all, it cannot be the case that a proposition and its negation are both true.³ But in that case, either Mary or John is making a mistake and the disagreement is not faultless. Indeed, if this line of reasoning is correct, it looks like faultless disagreement is impossible.

3 Relativism

Despite these apparent difficulties, the idea of faultless disagreement has not been abandoned. Relativists like Kölbel (2002, 2004, 2009) and Lasersohn (2005, p. 662) have argued that they are in a position to deliver faultless disagreement.⁴ In this section, I will present a simple relativist account of faultless disagreement.

The relativist views that I am going to discuss take propositional truth to be relative in some interesting sense. For the purpose of the following discussion, I will focus on Kölbel's (2002) version of relativism.⁵ According to Kölbel, propositions are true or false relative to perspectives. This allows us to say that the proposition that haggis is tasty is true relative to Mary's perspective, but false relative to John's perspective.

This is supposed to explain how faultless disagreement is possible. What matters is that nobody believes something that is not true relative to their perspective. As long as what Mary believes is true relative to her perspective and what John believes is true relative to his perspectives, neither of them has made a mistake.

According to this kind of relativist story, faultless disagreement is still a matter of there being a proposition such that one party believes that proposition and the other party believes its negation. However, since truth is relative to

³I am not going to discuss the possibility that we can make sense of faultless disagreement if we accept some kind of non-classical logic. See e.g. Wright (2006) and Beall (2006) for relevant discussion.

⁴There are relativists who adopt a more cautious attitude towards faultless disagreement. For instance, MacFarlane (2005, 2007) does not put a lot of emphasis on faultless disagreement and Richard (2008, p. 132) finds the idea of faultless disagreement problematic from a relativist point of view.

⁵It sometimes looks like there are as many versions of relativism as there are relativists. See e.g. Richard (2004, 2008), Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2005, 2007), Egan (2007, 2010), and Stephenson (2007) for other ways in which to develop relativism.

perspectives, it is still possible for each party to believe something that is true relative to his or her perspective. That is supposed to be enough for us to say they have not made a mistake.

Kölbel and Lasersohn argue that it is one of the advantages of relativism that it allows us to make sense of faultless disagreement.⁶ Kölbel sometimes gives the impression that this is something that sets relativism apart from its rivals.

There are disagreements without error, or in other words, some propositions are not objective. However, minimal constraints on truth show that if it is true that p , then it is not true that not- p , and if it is true that not- p , then it is not true that p . So if one thinker believes that p and another thinker believes that not- p , one of them makes the mistake of believing a proposition that is not true. The only way to allow faultless disagreement is therefore to relativise truth to perspectives: one disputant's belief is true in his or her own perspective, and the other disputant's contradictory belief is true in his or her own perspective. (Kölbel, 2002, p. 100)

This makes it sound as if relativism is the only way of making sense of faultless disagreement. However, in the next section, I will argue that that is not the case. There is a way of making sense of faultless disagreement that does not require relativism.

4 Conflicting Attitudes

The main point of this paper is that adopting some form of relativism is not the only way of making sense of faultless disagreement. In this section, I will present an alternative account that is based on the idea that disagreement sometimes involves attitudes other than belief. While disagreement is sometimes a matter of having conflicting beliefs, it can also be a matter of having conflicting non-doxastic attitudes, such as desires or preferences.

The general idea has a lot in common with Stevenson's (1937, 1944, 1963) distinction between what he called 'disagreement in belief' and what he

⁶Both Kölbel and Lasersohn emphasise that there are other ways of motivating relativism, apart from faultless disagreement. See e.g. Kölbel (2009) and Lasersohn (2009).

called ‘disagreement in attitude’.⁷ A case of disagreement in belief is simply a case of conflicting beliefs. There is a proposition such that one party believes that proposition and another party believes its negation. But there are also cases of disagreement involving attitudes such as approval and disapproval. For instance, it could be that one party approves of something that the other party disapproves of. In that case, we would have a case of disagreement in attitude.

However, we do not have to follow Stevenson in distinguishing between two kinds of disagreement. One way of thinking about the underlying picture is that disagreement is a matter of having conflicting attitudes, with ‘attitudes’ being understood in a suitably broad sense. We can have conflicting attitudes in virtue of having conflicting beliefs, but there can also be conflicts involving other attitudes. Stevenson (1944, p. 3) mentions purposes, aspirations, wants, preferences, and desires. Other potential examples are liking, admiring, hoping, and so forth. For instance, if you want something to be the case and I want it not to be the case, there is a sense in which we have conflicting attitudes. Similarly, we have conflicting attitudes if there is something that you like and I dislike (Weatherson, 2009; Huvenes, 2012). In these cases, it sounds quite natural to say that there is a sense in which we disagree.

This is obviously a fairly sketchy picture and I will not say much about how to develop it further, except to point out some salient options. One option is to say that two attitudes are in conflict if and only if it is not possible for a single individual to rationally or coherently have both attitudes (Dreier, 2009). Another option is to say that two attitudes are in conflict if and only if they cannot both be satisfied (Stevenson, 1963; Jackson, 2008). Alternatively, one might resist the temptation to try to offer a definition or reductive analysis and attempt to make sense of conflicting attitudes in some other way. There is a lot that to be said here, but a more thorough discussion must be left for another occasion.

What matters for our purposes is how this relates to faultless disagreement. The important point is that there can be cases of disagreement involving attitudes other than belief. The initial reasoning which led us to question the

⁷This way of thinking about disagreement can also be found in the works of contemporary expressivists like Blackburn (1984, 1998) and Gibbard (1990, 2003). However, this way of thinking about disagreement is also available to non-expressivists. See e.g. Jackson and Pettit (1998), Dreier (1999, 2009), and Huvenes (2012). Nothing that I say in this paper presupposes expressivism in any way, shape, or form.

possibility of faultless disagreement, relied on the assumption that disagreement always involves conflicting beliefs. If a case of disagreement does not have to involve conflicting beliefs, faultless disagreement becomes a possibility. We do not need a fully developed account of disagreement in order to make that point. We can also to some extent leave it an open question exactly what the relevant non-doxastic attitudes are. For instance, it does not seem to matter whether we are talking about liking or wanting something.

When we have a conflict of non-doxastic attitudes, there is much less pressure to think that one of the parties must be making a mistake. For instance, if Mary likes haggis and John dislikes haggis, that does not entail that one of them is wrong or making any kind of mistake.⁸ The same is true in the case of conflicting desires. If Mary wants it to be the case that they have haggis for dinner and John wants it to be the case that they do not have haggis for dinner, that does not entail that anyone is making a mistake.

The upshot of this is that we can make sense of faultless disagreement without being committed to relativism. This means that the presence of faultless disagreement is not sufficient to show that a relativist account is required. Moreover, I will argue that an account of faultless disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes can avoid some of the problems that have been raised in connection with relativist accounts of faultless disagreement.

5 A Dilemma

While relativists like Kölbel and Lasersohn have taken it to be an attractive feature of their views that they can secure faultless disagreement, that is far from universally accepted. In the debate about relativism, the idea of faultless disagreement has been met with considerable scepticism. Glanzberg expresses this scepticism in a fairly straightforward manner.

Lasersohn, and a number of other contemporary relativists, point out that their notion of relative truth offers a notion of ‘faultless disagreement’, where two utterances express disagreement, even though neither is incorrect (cf. Kölbel 2002). From a traditional, non-relativist,

⁸The point is not that someone can never count as having made a mistake in virtue of liking something. The point is that if you dislike something that I like, that does not entail that one of us is making a mistake.

point of view, this idea is *prima facie* absurd: if two propositions express disagreement, one must fail to be correct. [...] My own inclination is to side with the traditional view, and reject the notion of faultless disagreement as absurd. (Glanzberg, 2007, p. 16)

I take it that this attitude is not uncommon. In the recent debate about relativism, there have been several attempts to discredit the relativist story about faultless disagreement.⁹ However, as we have seen, relativism is not only the way of making sense of faultless disagreement. I am going to look at some of the alleged problems with relativist accounts of faultless disagreement and argue that these problems do not threaten alternative accounts that make use of the idea that disagreement can involve non-doxastic attitudes.

I am going to start by looking at an argument that has been put forward by Rosenkranz (2008). He presents a dilemma for relativists like Kölbel who want to make sense of faultless disagreement.¹⁰ Suppose that there is a proposition p such that you believe that p and I believe that not- p .¹¹ Furthermore, let us assume that p is true relative to your perspective, but false relative to my perspective. Rosenkranz argues that if you merely present p as true relative to your perspective, and I merely present not- p as true relative to my perspective, we do not really have a disagreement. On the other hand, if we present the propositions in question as true *simpliciter* or relative to every perspective, we do have a disagreement, but it is not faultless. It is a mistake to present p as true *simpliciter* or relative to every perspective if it is only true relative to my perspective.

There is certainly room for debate concerning the extent to which this argument succeeds in raising a problem for Kölbel's account of faultless disagreement. A natural reaction is that relativists may not want to accept that there is no disagreement if I merely present p as true relative to my perspective, and you present not- p as true relative to your perspective. Rosenkranz will

⁹Several commentators have expressed doubts about the idea that relativism can deliver faultless disagreement. See e.g. Stojanovic (2007), Moruzzi (2008), Rosenkranz (2008), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009), and Moltmann (2010).

¹⁰See e.g. Stojanovic (2007, p. 696) and Moltmann (2010, p. 195) for similar arguments.

¹¹Rosenkranz (2008) runs his argument in terms of assertion rather than belief. Since I am inclined to think of disagreement as a phenomenon at the level of thought, I prefer to run the argument in terms of belief. However, I am assuming that this does not make much of a difference.

presumably be unhappy with such a response, but it looks like this is something that would require further discussion.

The point that I want to make is that this argument does not threaten an account of faultless disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes. Insofar as there is a problem, it is a problem that has to do with believing propositions that are true or false relative to perspectives. An account of disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes avoids these issues. Not only do the relevant cases of disagreement involve attitudes other than belief, but there is also no need to say that propositional truth is relative. It is hard to see what a corresponding worry about faultless disagreement involving conflicting desires or preferences would look like.

6 Another Dilemma

In this section, I will discuss another problem for relativist accounts of faultless disagreement due to Richard (2008) and Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009). It turns out that it is difficult to reconcile the relativist account of faultless disagreement with plausible assumptions about the relationship between truth and error. That means that relativists face another dilemma.

Even though relativists take proposition truth to be relative, that does not prevent them from being able to introduce a monadic truth predicate. In many ways this is good for the relativists. There is no need to regard our ordinary use of the truth predicate as involving some kind of mistake. In particular, they can say that sentences like (3a)-(3c) are true relative to every perspective.

- (3) a. The proposition that p is true if and only if p .
- b. The belief that p is true if and only if p .
- c. The assertion that p is true if and only if p .

However, as Richard (2008, p. 132) and Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, p. 131) have pointed out, this creates problems with respect to faultless disagreement. Insofar as the relativists make use of a monadic truth predicate that works in this way, they will either have to give up the idea of faultless disagreement or accept the truth of certain counter-intuitive sentences.

In order to see the problem, it is helpful to look an example. Let us suppose that Mary believes the proposition that haggis is tasty and that John

believes the proposition that haggis is not tasty. As before, the proposition that haggis is tasty is true relative to Mary's perspective, but false relative to John's perspective. In that case, when John asserts (4), what he says is true relative to his perspective.

(4) Mary's belief that haggis is tasty is false.

But then it is hard for him to deny that Mary is making a mistake. Think about how strange it would be to say something like (5).

(5) Mary's belief that haggis is tasty is false, but she isn't making a mistake.

If the relativists want to preserve the straightforward connection between truth and error, they need to say that it is true relative to John's perspective that Mary is making a mistake. In other words, they need to extend the relativist account to expressions like 'wrong' and 'mistake'. The proposition that Mary is wrong is true relative to John's perspective, but false relative to Mary's perspective.

This point applies to cases of faultless disagreement across the board. The relevant cases of faultless disagreement were supposed to be cases in which there is a proposition p such that one party believes that p and the other party believes that not- p . I am assuming that p and not- p cannot be true relative to a single perspective. That means that it is going to be true relative to every perspective that one of the parties believes something that is not true. But then there is a lot of pressure to admit that it is also going to be true relative to every perspective that one of the parties has made a mistake. The alternative is to learn to live with the truth of sentences like (5).¹²

This puts the relativists in an awkward position when it comes to making sense of faultless disagreement. A case of faultless disagreement is a case of disagreement in which neither party is wrong or making a mistake. But it is difficult for the relativists to say that if it is true relative to every perspective that one of the parties must be making a mistake. It looks like the relativists have to face another dilemma. If they do not want to accept that sentences

¹²MacFarlane (forthcoming) suggests that we can distinguish between different senses of 'mistake'. But it is not clear that this really addresses the problem. As long as there are true readings of sentences like 'What you believe is false, but you are not making a mistake', the view is still making seemingly incorrect predictions. At the very least, this kind of response would have to be supplemented with a story about why the relevant reading of 'mistake' is not available in the relevant cases.

like (5) can be true, they have to make concessions with respect to faultless disagreement.

Perhaps one could try to amend the characterisation of faultless disagreement. What matters is that it is true relative to each party's perspective that she has not made a mistake. It is true relative to Mary's perspective that she has not made a mistake and it is true relative to John's perspective that he has not made a mistake.

This might preserve some of the spirit of the original idea, but it is hard to shake the impression that it is a concession. We have moved away from the straightforward characterisation of faultless disagreement that we started out with. Furthermore, someone who is attracted to the idea of faultless disagreement might have thought that it should be possible for you to believe that I have not made a mistake even if you believe that we disagree. But that is not captured by this characterisation. It would therefore be interesting if we could find a way of making sense of faultless disagreement that allowed us to avoid these issues altogether.

7 Disagreement without Falsity

An account of faultless disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes avoids these problems having to do with the relationship between truth and error. Insofar as Richard (2008) and Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) succeed in raising a problem for relativist accounts of faultless disagreement, that is because the relativists are only concerned with cases involving conflicting beliefs. In cases like that, it is natural to think that one of the parties must believe something that is not true and it is hard to deny that someone who believes something that is not true is making some kind of mistake.

If there are cases of faultless disagreement involving, say, desires or preferences, the issue of truth does not arise. That means that someone who thinks about faultless disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes can accept that it is always a mistake to believe something that is not true. From this point of view, there might very well be a straightforward connection between believing something that is not true and making a mistake. However, there is no straightforward connection between disagreement and someone believing something that is not true. That is because there are cases of disagreement that do

not involve belief.

Someone who is opposed to the idea of faultless disagreement might try to argue that there is a more general connection between disagreement and error. However, I am not sure that there are good reasons to accept that there is such a connection. There appears to be something wrong with a sentence like (5) and that provides some motivation for postulating a connection between believing something that is not true and making a mistake. But it is not clear that there is anything wrong with a sentence like (6).

(6) Mary likes haggis. I disagree with her, but she isn't making a mistake.

In fact, if we take the idea of faultless disagreement seriously, we should be open to the possibility that it can be appropriate to say things like this. If cases of faultless disagreement were possible, it would be strange if the parties were prevented from describing their disagreement as faultless. More needs to be said before I am convinced that this is a problem for an account of faultless disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes.

However, we should be careful not to overstate the significance of the point that I have made in this section. Even if we accept that an account of faultless disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes avoids some of the problems with a relativist account of faultless disagreement, that does mean that the former is superior to the latter. More would have to be done in order to show that the relativists do not have an adequate response to these problems. Moreover, an account of faultless disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes might suffer from problems of its own. Some philosophers might even be reluctant to accept the idea that there can be cases of disagreement involving non-doxastic attitudes in the first place.¹³

I have also not made any specific claims about alleged cases of faultless disagreement. For instance, I have not said anything about how we should understand cases involving expressions like 'fun' and 'tasty'. There might be specific features of such cases that only a relativist account can accommodate. But it might also be that such cases do not involve faultless disagreement after all. Nothing I have said turns on whether that is the case. I have only ar-

¹³It is also worth keeping in mind that these accounts are not incompatible. Even if some cases of faultless disagreement involve non-doxastic attitudes, there might be other cases that require a relativist treatment.

gued that the presence of faultless disagreement does not mean that a relativist account is required.

8 Concluding Remarks

My main goal in this paper has been to suggest that we can make sense of faultless disagreement without being committed to any form of relativism. The idea is that there can be cases of disagreement that involve non-doxastic attitudes, attitudes other than belief. Faultless disagreement only seemed to be impossible without relativism because we were focusing on cases involving conflicting beliefs.

Furthermore, I have argued that an account of faultless disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes avoids some of the problems that a relativist account must confront. In particular, I have looked at the problems raised by Rosenkranz (2008), Richard (2008), and Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) and argued that these problems do not threaten an account of faultless disagreement in terms of non-doxastic attitudes.

There are two main lessons that we can draw from this. The first lesson is that we should not confuse an argument against relativist accounts of faultless disagreement with an argument against faultless disagreement in general. The second lesson is that we should not assume that faultless disagreement necessarily calls for a relativist account.

The general point should be interesting to people on both sides of the debate. For instance, If one is attracted to the idea of faultless disagreement, but reluctant to endorse relativism, one should welcome my conclusion. If one is opposed to the general idea of faultless disagreement, one might find that one needs to do more work in order to show that faultless disagreement is impossible. It is not enough to argue against a relativist account of faultless disagreement. One also has to consider the possibility that there can be cases of faultless disagreement involving attitudes other than belief.

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