

Perspectival Disagreement

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Abstract

The (alleged) phenomenon of so-called ‘faultless disagreement’ has recently been used to argue for relativism: only relativising truth or content to ‘contexts of assessments’ can explain, it has been said, why there is no real dispute about matters of taste, even though taste ascriptions purport to describe reality. I argue that another, more plausible, diagnosis is available: the ‘reality’ in question is partly mind-dependent, and our reference to it is aspectival. This explains, or so I argue, the data and allows for a plausible liberal account of how we should deal with such disagreements.

Faultless disagreement

Faultless disagreement, it is commonly held, might arise as follows:

utterance u_1 by person A : “This orange is sweet.”

utterance u_2 by person B : “This orange is bitter.”

Let us also suppose that the disagreement is faultless at least to the extent that (i) A and B are equally well justified in their assertions; (ii) both report their opinions sincerely and with the intention of contradicting the other and (iii) they would stick to their assertions if they had tasted the bit of the orange the other is in fact chewing. Let us also suppose that the circumstances are normal, in that neither A or B is in a state usually taken to disqualify them (or to significantly lower their credibility) in matters of taste (e.g. neither has just brushed their teeth), and that their faculties of taste are physiologically alike.¹

It is commonly, though not universally, agreed that such faultless disagreements in matters of taste actually occurs in real life² and I will presuppose so in this paper. The best reason, in my view, to believe in the existence of faultless disagreement is so to say political: given their irresolvability in principle, *we want* to characterise such disagreements as faultless, so as not to be obliged to take sides and to attribute blame or praise in an asymmetric way. Matching in-principle-irresolvability with rational faultlessness thus not only allows, but provides an argument for tolerance: that the disagreement is faultless is a reason that it should ultimately be avoided at all.³ As things stand, however, there are faultless disagreement, or at least I will assume so in the present paper.⁴

The philosophers’ problem, as often, is to explain how this is possible. The main task of a philosophical account of faultless disagreement is to show how both A and B may disagree (at least in the minimal sense

1. This latter assumption is needed to rule out cases like the one reported by ZED ADAMS about chicorice

2. A dissenting voice is Democritus who believes that sweet things are sweet because they entirely consist of round and large atoms, and bitter things are bitter because they have only spherical, smooth, scalene and small atoms. It is not clear to me how Democritus could even explain the appearance of faultlessness of disagreements like the one between A and B .

3. Of the “*de gustibus non est disputandum*”, Stigler & Becker (1977: 76) say that “the venerable admonition not to quarrel over tastes is commonly interpreted as advice to terminate a dispute when it has been resolved into a difference of taste”. It should be noted, however, that they oppose this interpretation.

4. I will remain neutral, however, about the question how far my – and the relativists’ – discussion about taste-disagreements generalises? It does carry over, it seems to me, to knowledge attributions (where I would epistemic profiles have play the rôle of so-called ‘standards of knowledge attribution’), but probably not to future contingents.

in which it would be wrong for A to stand by u_1 and ‘say the same thing’ as B) and both be ‘right’ (in the sense required for their disagreement to be faultless). This can only be done by distinguishing the object of their disagreement from what they are right about. It is in terms of such a conceptual distinction that we have to steer a middle course between the Scylla of objectivism (allowing for disagreement, but not for faultlessness) and the Charybdis of subjectivism (allowing for faultlessness, but not for disagreement).⁵

The distinction needed should account, in the first place, for the blamelessness of both A and B : such an account should explain why, given their situation and their communicative ends, it makes sense for them to make their respective utterances, and it should do so symmetrically.⁶ The broader significance of the point is to distinguish between blameworthiness for norm-violation and excusability – an agent may be excusable and still blameworthy, or blameless but not excusable (this is not Williamson’s terminology, who correlates blamelessness with justification).

The characteristic relativist move is to draw this distinction in terms of the evaluations of u_1 and u_2 for *truth*. This, relativists typically claim, not only makes faultless disagreement possible, but is also the best explanation of its reality.⁷ The central relativist claim is thus:

relativism the evaluations of u_1 and u_2 for truth are not invariant

Correlative to different sources of this variance (or ‘relativity’) in the evaluations of u_1 and u_2 for truth, we may distinguish different types of relativisms:

content relativism *what is evaluated* when we evaluate u_1 and u_2 is not invariant

ontological relativism *what u_1 and u_2 are evaluated with respect to* is not invariant

truth relativism *what u_1 and u_2 are evaluated for* is not invariant

Content relativists find the variance relativists look for in what is said in the two utterances, distinguishing the two different and non-contradictorily true things said in u_1 and u_2 from the more restrictive content A and B disagree about.⁸ Truth relativists deploy a notion of relative truth that applies to both u_1 and u_2 , while still being contrary in the sense of allowing for disagreement. In contrast, ontological relativists locate the relativity or variance in what u_1 and u_2 are about or in what makes them true. As with the two other versions of relativism, the main task for the ontological relativist is to say what it is A and B disagree about. In contrast to them, however, she has the resources to draw the relevant distinction at the ontological level. Is it here, I will argue, that her distinctive advantage lies.

5. This way of setting up the problem is perhaps not by all lights the standard one. It is often said that the task is to account for alleged linguistic “data”. QUOTES While I do not think it matters for the purposes of this paper, I nevertheless think that the real problem already arises in the armchair. First, the “data” have been challenged and the jury on the empirical relevance of all this is still out. Second, making sense of the conceptual possibility of faultless disagreement is prior to explaining its actuality. Third, and most importantly, we should keep in mind that what philosophers take to be “accounts” (of psychological reality, presumably) linguists take to be “models” (to be judged by their predictive force and theoretical usefulness). It may very well be (and, from the armchair, even looks quite probable) that different and theoretically non-equivalent such models will be empirically equivalent, which would then again land us in the armchair.

6. Blamelessness here has to be restricted to ‘primary norms’; even when an agent complies with these, she may still be blameworthy in a wider sense for violating derivative norms. Timothy Williamson explores such derivative norms in “Justifications, Excuses, and Sceptical Scenarios” (ms., available on this webpage, presented as “Legality and Law-Abidingness” in Geneva on September 13, 2013.

7. (In his earlier work, Kölbel more modestly proposed his notion of perspectival truth as a model for faultless disagreement, explicating its divergence from objective truth in terms of non-objectivity of subject-matter, which was in turn explained in terms of the possibility of faultless disagreement.)

There are, of course, others, and perhaps even more prominent arguments for relativism, e.g. the claim that it best explains the so-called disagreement and retraction data. Insofar these arguments are not versions of the argument from faultless disagreement (some of them are, the (lack of) disagreement being different stages of the same person), I do not have the space to discuss them here (but cf. also fn. 5).

8. Such a distinction can be drawn in very different ways. Some theorists advocate broadening the notion of what is said to include much more than literal and speaker meaning,

Ontological relativism has, as far as I know, not been squarely addressed in recent discussions of semantically motivated forms of relativism. The reason for this, I suspect, is that the debate has usually been framed as a discussion of the resources available to the *contextualist* to accommodate the apparent data. A common complaint against contextualism is then that it collapses into subjectivism, in that it has to claim that the utterances of *A* and *B* are covertly or implicitly about themselves:⁹

If [contextualism] were right, there would be an analogy between disputes of inclination and the ‘dispute’ between one who says ‘I am tired’ and her companion who replies, ‘Well, I am not’ (when what is at issue is one more museum visit). (Wright 2001: 451) According to [simple indexicalism], when I say ‘Blair ought to go to war’, I assert that my moral code requires Blair to go to war. I am therefore talking *about* my moral code. However, this seems wrong: I talk about Blair and what he ought to do, and *not* about my moral code and what it requires Blair to do. (Kölbel 2004: 303) (cf. also Kölbel (2002: 113)) The contextualist takes the subjectivity of a discourse to consist in the fact that it is covertly about the speaker [...]. Thus in saying that apples are “delicious”, the speaker says, in effect, that apples taste good to her (or to those in her group). (MacFarlane 2007: 18)

On this [contextualist] view, “It’s wrong to cheat” involves ellipsis, or a place holder indicating a set of standards, a code, whatever. What [its] use says depends on what has been elided or what is being assigned to the place holder. (Richard 2008: 89)

...any indexical proposal distorts the content of the utterances, for it claims that Anna and Barbara assert (and believe) propositions that concern their own standards, even though it seems that they are merely comparing Depp and Pitt without their assertions and thoughts having any reflective content. (Kölbel 2008: 13)

The second option is to adopt a form of [contextualism] according to which the candidate disputes are really faultless, but they are only apparent disagreements. In this case the view is that the judgments conveyed by *A* and *B* are, or are equivalent to, those expressed by sentences involving reference to *A* and *B* themselves. (Iacona 2008: 288)

If content itself is relative in this way, there is no common content for the speakers to disagree about: Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009) call this the ‘problem of shared content’.¹⁰ While this problem is not unique to contextualism (as we have seen, all three brands of relativism face it too), I will grant for the purposes of this paper that contextualists are ill-equipped to solve it:¹¹ *A* and *B* are just not talking about themselves.

What I take issue with, however, is that this argument rules out ontological relativism too. While ontological relativists hold that u_1 and u_2 are to be evaluated for truth with respect to different bits of reality, they are not committed to the claim that the utterances are (explicitly or implicitly) *about* these different bits. Such a distinction between *aboutness* and *truthmaking* is familiar in other areas of metaphysics: while physicalists claim that ascriptions of mental states are made true by physical states, they do not have to (and better do not) claim that such ascriptions are about physical states.

9. “Indexical relativism” is a form of contextualism: The view criticised with these arguments is usually, e.g. by Kölbel (2004), called “indexical relativism”. As it does not satisfy (**relativism**) above, I take it to be a form of contextualism.

10. To answer this charge, contextualists can draw on the rich literature on the semantics/pragmatics interface and invoke the recently much studied mechanisms of ‘free enrichment’, whereby contextual information is made available for the hearer without thereby becoming part of the semantic content of the utterance.

11. This includes, in my view, contextualists who externalise the way in which their standards are determined indexically by ideal judges of taste (LOPEZ DE SA) or the standards of taste one should have (ZAKKOU). Such proposals either claim that *A* and *B* talk *about* these things in u_1 and u_2 , or they claim that these indexically determined elements enter into the *presuppositions* of what they are saying. The first claim is false, the second very questionable, as the disagreement seems to persist even when these presuppositions are explicitly cancelled: “I know I am not an ideal judge of this, but the orange *is* sweet – no, it is bitter”; “I know I do not have the standard of taste I should have, but the orange *is* sweet – no it is bitter”.

I propose to explain the faultlessness of the disagreement between *A* and *B* in terms of their utterances being about different aspects of the taste-profile of the orange. Even though the aspects they perceive are different, they are aspects of the same orange, which is the truthmaker of their claims if they have a truthmaker, which explains that there is disagreement in the first place. Facts about aspects of objects which are such that they may have conflicting aspects, i.e. aspects that cannot be manifested ‘together’ (in a sense to be explained much more below), are plausible called “non-objective”. I thus explain faultless disagreement by the non-objectivity of its subject matter.¹²

In the rest of the paper, I want to sketch how ontological relativists may allow for faultless disagreement by claiming that the conflict between *A* and *B* is faultless because u_1 and u_2 are about perspectival facts (section 3): *A* and *B* are both talking about the taste of the orange, but because taste is a secondary quality of oranges, the aspects of its taste profile that they are talking about are different: in and of itself, the orange does not have a taste, it’s taste is a relational property, implicating tasters. Even though they are talking about different things, however, *A* and *B* do disagree, because the different perspectival facts are still grounded in the same item of reality – the orange (section 4). Disentangling in this way aboutness and truthmaking allows, I will further claim in sect. 5, for a politically satisfactory accommodation of faultless disagreements. Before moving on to the positive account, we have to get clearer on the desiderata for a theory of faultless disagreement about taste and on the reasons why the extant accounts do not quite meet them.

Arguing about taste

Whoever has organised conference meals for philosophers knows that normally they do not care much about tastes. Here as in other areas, however, philosophers are barely exemplars of the enlightened rational ideal man: it is certainly possible to sensibly argue about taste and tastes, many rational people do and much can turn on the outcome of such discussions. As people having brought up in rigidly food-conscious or pathologically smell-averse communities can attest, there are rational limits to taste fanaticism: though disagreements about taste may be sensible, even productive, there should not be allowed to become struggles for life and death. But where is the line between sensible and insensible disagreements to be drawn? Reflection on this question may help us delineate the desiderata of a theory of faultless disagreement about matters of taste.

A first desideratum is that an account of taste disputes should leave open, but not entail the existence of expertise in the matter disputed.

Distinguish blamelessness from faultlessness: I know that I have many false beliefs about electricity, including the belief that electricity literally flows, recognise this as metaphorical and a literal reading of it as magical thinking. I also know how to find out. But it may still be permissible for me not to correct my errors, even though it would be good if I were to. I am at fault, but not to be blamed.

HERE COMES BLAMELESSNESS AND BEING AT FAULT

The case with applications of predicates of personal taste (‘delicious’) to wines, say, is exactly analogous. It would be good for me to know more, to have judgments that are better justified, deeper in some sense, but as a plain user of wine, and plain user of electricity, I cannot be blamed for my opinions, though they may still be false and I therefore at fault.

The claim to expertise that adds ‘oomph’ to a dispute about taste cannot be part of what is – explicitly or implicitly – under dispute, however: these matters, who is an expert, how things taste according to a given

12. This is an exact reversal of the direction of explanation championed in the broadly Dummettian tradition, by e.g. Crispin Wright and Max Kölbel (2000, 2002: 22). It may be that the predominance of the Dummettian take on the realism/antirealism debate has occluded ontological relativism from the view of its participants.

standard or how things should taste to us, may very well be objective, or are at least not subjective in the same way as tastes are supposed to be.¹³

Another approach that has recently been advocated – the so-called “superiority account” defended in Zakkou DISSERTATION – holds that u_1 and u_2 do not only convey (or at least: do not only express the propositions) that the orange is sweet and that it is bitter respectively, but also something like “ A ’s standard of sweetness is best” and “ B ’s standard of bitterness (or, perhaps, of sweetness?) is best”. The ‘directly’ expressed propositions are then counted as both true, but non-contrary, and at least one of the contrary pragmatically conveyed propositions will be false. This divide-and-conquer strategy risks inheriting the weaknesses of both proposals it combines: (i) to account for the non-contrariness of the propositions directly expressed, they have to have contextual elements, which makes them at least partly *about A and B*; (ii) to account for the faultlessness of the disagreement with respect to the pragmatically conveyed propositions, more has to be said.¹⁴ Another problem, however, is more serious: Even if we somehow manage to individuate standards of sweetness finely enough to map the patterns of disagreement (and lack thereof) we observe in discussions of taste, it is not clear what the *content* of the propositions allegedly pragmatically conveyed is supposed to be. What does it mean to say that some standard of taste (or, more particularly, of sweetness) is best? The very possibility of faultless disagreement seems to undermine any attempt of spelling this out.

A second desideratum is to do justice to the intimate connection our judgments of taste have with our sensibility: judgments of taste are perceptual.

indexicalists: OUR COMMON STANDARD Harman (1975) and Dreier (1990) at least it excludes Hitler who is ‘beyond the pale’ (1975: p. 7; see also Dreier, 1990: p. 570).

Desideratum (i) straightforwardly rules out the so-called “presuppositional account”, defended inter alia by Dan López de Sa (2003: 132–137, 2007, 2008 and 2010

This is as it should be, as it is simply implausible that utterances of (1) trigger the presupposition that A ’s and B ’s tastes are the same. Even if they would, moreover, they would presumably be cancelled in the case of transparent and explicit disagreement.

Such a theory, I argue, promises to meet the following four desiderata for an account of disagreement in the realm of taste:

1. allows for disagreement not conditional on the presupposition that the tastes are the same;
2. allows for culinary learning and teaching;
3. allows for a distinction between deeper and more shallow disagreement and places disagreement about culinary tastes on this scale between disagreements about the morally right and the comic.

Desideratum (i) straightforwardly rules out the so-called “presuppositional account”, Desideratum (ii) rules out subjectivism: if A ’s and B ’s respective utterances are interpreted as reports only of private impressions, if they are Desideratum (iii) puts pressure on truth and content relativism.

Aspectival reference

CHECK IN KOELBEL 2004 paradigm relativists, for instance Harman, would not qualify as relativists if (iv) were added. RELATIVITY, BUT NO VARIATION (??) IS THIS HARMAN’S VIEW? See Kölbel, 2002, Ch. 7.4 for detailed discussion.

13. This problem has received surprisingly little attention, though Kölbel (2002: 41) discusses it.

14. Zakkou suggests that the pragmatically conveyed propositions are merely presupposed, not believed. Even if we grant that conflict of presuppositions accounts for disagreement, this inherits the problems of the presuppositional account: in particular, it does not account for disagreement in situations where the presupposition is explicitly cancelled.

There is a grain of truth in what relativists say about the content of ‘it’s tasty’ - it’s not about the speaker (nor about judges, nor does it involve a presupposition of commonality) - but perspectival facts can explain all this

reason is: taste, colour and sound properties of things are extrinsic, and different taste / sound / colour profiles belong to the same thing; these are perspectival entities, lesser entities, and they being the truthmakers of the relativistic claims explains in what sense their perception is part of how the world reveals itself to us and how the incompatibility of different perspectives is not at bottom one of content, but of mode.

My broader aim is to characterise a genuinely metaphysical form of relativistic content, where each party states a perspectival fact, and is thus epistemically faultless. Because the different perspectival facts are still grounded in the same item of reality, there nevertheless is something for the contestants to disagree about.

We should avoid the postulation of mysterious standards and codes, and take the truthmakers of relative judgments to be secondary qualities – real, but non-fundamental properties of the external world. Faultless disagreement is not so much about truth itself (otherwise it could not be faultless), but about the truthmakers of our ascriptions of secondary qualities. When you and I disagree about whether liquorice is delicious, we represent different perspectival facts – in this sense, our disagreement is faultless. It is, however, still a disagreement *about* some real properties of liquorice, those responsible for you finding it tasteful and me finding it disgusting, and it is in these independently and objectively existing properties that our respective perspectival objects are grounded.

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Aspects truthmaking

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Compare utterance (1) with utterance (2):

(1) P

(2) The right thing to think about these matters, according to me, is: p

Plausibly, many utterances of (1) commit me to (2). In cases where I could not correctly (ie. truly) utter (2) but still utter (1), the sincerity condition for assertions is violated. But contrast (1) and (2) with the following utterances of my interlocutor:

(1') $\neg p$

(2') The right thing to think about these matters, according to me, is: $\neg p$

While (1') contradicts (1), (2') does not contradict (2).

The Politics of Disagreement

I said above that relativism (in my sense of the term) is characterised by the claim that to make sense of two utterances being faultlessly in disagreement, they have to be differently evaluated for *truth*. In all the extant literature, this has been taken to mean that they are, in a sense to be specified further, both true. In this last section, I want to explore another alternative: both faultlessly disagreeing utterances are in fact *false*, and this has consequences for how the disagreeing parties should conduct their argument.

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