

## DISAGREEMENTS: AN INTRODUCTION

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Annoying, fundamental, fun, superficial, painful, inspiring – disagreements come in all shapes and sizes and are part and parcel of human existence. Not all disagreements need solving and sometimes we can happily live with them. For example, disagreements about taste often do not need a resolution – we do not have to agree whether red is more beautiful than blue, or whether one ought to take one's coffee with milk and sugar (as opposed to taking it black). Diverse viewpoints, opinions, beliefs and attitudes often constitute a valuable resource. And yet, in all domains of life there is also work to be done in overcoming disagreements, whether by hashing out compromises or by winning and losing arguments.

The proper categorization of disagreements, the unpacking of premises, contexts and conclusions has been an important tradition in philosophy. However, a focused and systematic study of disagreement(s) should be of interest and relevance outside of philosophy as well. It is a significant philosophical insight (with practical consequences) that different kinds of disagreement require different resolution strategies. Consequently, before one adopts a strategy for resolving a particular disagreement, it is important to identify the kind of disagreement one is faced with. In what follows, we will briefly introduce the main kinds of disagreement.

Some disagreements are merely apparent – a predicament that primarily occurs when the disagreeing parties are, unbeknownst to them, merely talking past each other. Roughly, two parties talk past each other when the relevant terms they use have different meanings. In this way, they can unwittingly make claims that are not in fact incompatible, and, once they realize this, there should be no disagreement. For example, Mike and June (think they) disagree about whether the music playing at a neighbour's is loud. Mike says it is loud (meaning that he can hear it), June claims that it is not loud (she can hear the music, but it does not disturb her and so does not constitute being loud for her). One could reasonably say that the disagreement in this case is merely *verbal*. Such disagreements are very common and although

concluding that they are verbal is one way of solving them, working one's way towards the realisation that they are in fact verbal, might take considerable effort, time and skill.

However, another situation wherein it may be debated whether the two parties in fact disagree is so-called '*faultless* disagreement', where no party is in error. A disagreeing party can be at fault if the disagreement is over facts and the party gets the facts wrong. One can also be in error, if one bases one's position on a faulty or inapplicable theory. Such cases, it is said sometimes, involve *genuine* disagreement. However, in the case of faultless disagreement, both parties can be right. One way to make sense of this situation is to point out that they are right on their own terms, that is, if their claims are to be evaluated in different contexts. For example, imagine a disagreement between two people over whether their dinner is delicious, where one of them takes the dinner to be delicious (and he really likes its taste), whereas the other finds the dinner to be very good by her taste, but nothing remarkable. Once properly spelled out, we can see that both of them can be right. But then – did they really disagree in the first place, or were they instead talking past each other? Making sense of faultless disagreements is a contentious matter (see MacFarlane 2007). One way to argue that faultless disagreements do not involve talking past each other is to view them as metalinguistic disputes, that is, negotiations on what is the best or preferred use of a given contested term or what standard is appropriate in a given context (Sundell 2011). In that case, there is a substantive issue between the disputing parties about the appropriate usage of the terms (say, 'delicious dinner' in the above example), even if the disputants are not aware that they are engaged in such a negotiation. A second, and somewhat more radical, way to argue that faultless disagreements do not involve talking past one another is to establish a theory of content and truth, which allows one and the same content to be true for one assessor and false for another. Such a position on content and truth, known as semantic relativism, has been developed in detail by MacFarlane (2014).

Some disagreements are unrelenting. They persist even if due consideration is given to the relevant facts and use of language. Such disagreements are *deep* in the sense that they arise from some fundamental principles that ground one's world view or from the presuppositions of one's system of beliefs (see e.g. Ranalli 2018). A classic example of such disagreement is the abortion debate where the claims *pro et contra* abortion stem from one's background world view (Fogelin 1985). It is controversial whether deep disagreements are in effect faultless. For example, if there is no sense in which fundamental principles or commitments are incorrect or false, then it is also hard to see how one party to a deep disagreement could be making a mistake. The fact that deep disagreements are so persistent also raises the practical question of what to do in the face of disagreements that appear to admit no straightforward solution.

While the previously introduced disagreements can be classified on the basis of the object of disagreement (e.g. facts of the matter, linguistic issues or some combination of the two) and on the disagreeing parties' relation to this object (e.g. it is possible for both to be right, or not – one or other party must be wrong), disagreements can also be

identified on the basis of the parties to the disagreement (their characteristics). From this perspective, we can discern *peer disagreements* (see e.g. Feldman and Warfield 2010, Christensen and Lackey 2013). These are disagreements between parties who are epistemic peers with respect to the evidence for their claims. This is to say that they have access to evidence of equal or similar quality and are able to assess this evidence equally well. The main question is what to do when you encounter a peer that disagrees with you. Should you adopt a steadfast or a conciliatory strategy? That is, should you hold on to your initial belief or revise it? Or should you suspend judgement until you resolve the differences with your peer?

These kinds of disagreement and their theoretical ramifications in fields such as ontology, logic, epistemology and ethics have already received extensive treatment in the philosophical literature (Cohnitz and Marques 2014, Frances and Matheson 2018). However, we found that what is much less discussed are the practical consequences of the theoretical models of disagreement. The aim of this special issue is to bridge the gap between theory and practice; in particular, to inquire into the implications of theoretical positions for real life disagreements. We invited contributions on how to apply theoretical accounts of disagreements in areas such as morality, politics, meta-ethics, aesthetics, and on the practical implications of the epistemology and metaphysics of disagreement.

The first three articles in this issue deal with deep disagreements from different perspectives, applying this theoretical notion on ontology and logic, morality, ethics and justice. The list of contributions begins with **Daniel Cohnitz's** article "Verbal disputes and deep conceptual disagreements" that focuses on verbal disputes. He explicates the technical notion of having a merely verbal dispute by listing certain adequacy conditions for the analysis and reviews different existing proposals. He ends up by distinguishing between shallow and deep conceptual disagreement, both of which constitute talking past one another with respect to some subject matter. The distinctions Cohnitz makes in his paper have a wider relevance for ontological disputes as they open up a way to argue that although disputes about logic and ontology are not merely verbal, they could be deep disagreements and thus could still be fundamentally conceptual.

**Margit Sutrop's** paper "Deep conceptual moral disagreements: over what do we disagree and why?" is devoted to moral disagreements. She argues that moral disagreements can stem from four different sources. These disagreements could originate from the fundamental values of the disputing parties that are not commensurable on the same scale of values. They could be due to the fact that the conceptions of morality of the disputing parties are different (e.g. one might be deontological, the other virtue theoretic). Moral disagreements can also be caused by the fact that people have different notions of what kind of a person is exemplary and what kind of a good life we should strive for. Finally, the fact that the adherents of different moral theories see actions as being motivated by different reasons could also lead to moral disagreements. Given that disagreements over moral questions have such fundamental sources, Sutrop classifies some moral disagreements as deep disagreements. Thus, in contrast to mere verbal disagreements, moral disagreements

do not arise simply because parties to such a disagreement talk past each other and cannot be settled simply by appeals to rational argument.

Especially relevant in the current atmosphere of ‘cancel culture’ is **Manuel Knoll’s** contribution, wherein he argues for the need to develop an ethics of disagreement. An attitude of respect towards those who think differently often seems to be missing in contemporary debates, exemplified by the mostly *ad hominem* type of arguments being used. In “Deep disagreements on values, justice, and moral issues: towards an ethics of disagreement” Knoll draws on a rich resource – the history of philosophy – to characterize and acknowledge the existence of various kinds of disagreements. He proposes a broadly virtue-ethics based ethics of disagreement that would involve acceptance of opposing parties as intellectually worthy partners, instead of taking the easy way out and explaining the disagreement away by degrading one’s opponent as irrational or uninformed. Once we accept that certain disagreements are here to stay and we need to learn how to live with them, practical consequences follow. Often there is no need (nor possibility) of reaching a consensus on many deep disagreements but negotiations, bargaining, compromises and the obvious value of tolerance are tools that may help us survive and perhaps even flourish in the long term.

The next contribution also touches upon the themes of consensus and compromise. In “Political justificationism: a casuistic epistemology of political disagreement”, **Jay Carlson** draws attention to the role of context. Often hidden in more theoretical approaches to disagreements, context can offer us both an insight into the conflict and point towards possible and reasonable decision-making routes. Crucially, attention to context highlights that there might be no universal epistemic pattern for solving disagreements (however analytically pared down) nor should we look for one. Making use of casuistry – a reflection and decision-making approach well known in medical ethics – Carlson argues for the epistemic significance of four dimensions of political disagreement: domain, scope, genealogy and urgency. While no direct solution results from the analysis of these dimensions in any given case, they can potentially help us decide upon the epistemic value of information. There is special weight attached to political morality and decision-making given the coercive nature of politics. Thus it is only appropriate that our handling of political disagreements both allows for nuances on different levels (confidence, beliefs, policy) and supports the epistemic legitimacy of compromises.

The next three contributions tackle more epistemological themes such as introspection, peer disagreement and knowledge. However, in line with the overall orientation of this special issue, they apply theoretical notions from one field to other more practical fields and thus link different subfields of philosophy. In “What kinds of disagreement are introspective disputes?”, **Bruno Mölder** applies theoretical distinctions between kinds of disagreement on introspective disputes. Namely, he poses the question of what kind or kinds of disagreement do people have when they have an introspective dispute. A dispute is introspective if the disputants are aiming to make some general claims about experience on the basis of their introspection. Mölder reviews various main kinds of disagreements with regard to introspective disputes. He discusses verbal, metalinguistic, faultless, deep and genuine disagreements and

concludes that introspective debates exemplify genuine theoretical disagreements and that sometimes, the parties of introspective debates engage in metalinguistic negotiation as well.

The experience of disagreement might push us cognitively in opposing directions. But whether it is the belief-revisionist conciliatory attitude, the steadfast one or some third-way compromise, trust in our own epistemic practices plays a role in each of these positions. Epistemic self-trust – reliance on and trust towards our very own epistemic practices – is the key concept in **Simon Barker's** article "Principles of disagreement, the practical case for epistemic self-trust, and why the two don't get along". He carefully links debates from the epistemology of disagreement with the role of epistemic self-trust (more specifically, affective self-trust) in our lives and draws attention to the existence of a fundamental tension between the two.

**Toomas Lott's** "Disagreement and knowledge: the case of Plato's *Alcibiades*" takes us to the very beginning of Western philosophical thought about disagreement. In the *Alcibiades*, Socrates argues that a persistent and systematic disagreement within a community is a sign of ignorance of its individual members. Lott unpacks the premises of this argument and arrives at the conclusion that, for Socrates in the *Alcibiades*, knowledge can always be shared. Those who possess knowledge are able to communicate it and convince others, thereby fostering agreement. It is for this reason that persistent disagreement indicates ignorance of both parties to disagreement. Lott compares this argument with other Platonic sources and highlights the potentially problematic consequences that this Platonic argument from disagreement entails for philosophers as members of an epistemic community.

The last three contributions all discuss issues in meta-ethics and moral philosophy. In his contribution "Meta-ethical disagreements", **Francesco Orsi** attempts to salvage the possibility of meta-ethics from Ronald Dworkin's argument against Archimedean scepticism, the view that it is possible to show on non-moral grounds that there are no moral claims that are objectively true. At the same time, the Archimedean sceptic remains neutral with respect to first-order moral views and controversies. In arguing against this kind of scepticism, Dworkin presents a dilemma about meta-ethical disagreements – either they are merely verbal disagreements or they are disagreements about first-order ethical issues. Orsi points out that if the dilemma holds, this casts doubt on the discipline of meta-ethics as a whole. He attempts to restore meta-ethical disagreements to their standing by showing that they can be rearticulated as normative (but not necessarily moral) disagreements about the appropriate conduct of moral argument. If this is true, then meta-ethical controversies do have normative implications, but that makes them neither first-order ethical disagreements nor verbal disagreements.

Disagreements on moral issues can raise the question of just how objective morality is, and this is even more so if the people having moral disagreements are experts on the matter; that is, moral philosophers. In his article, "Moral realism and expert disagreement", **Prabhpal Singh** argues that disagreement between moral experts does not constitute an objection to moral realism (the view that there are objectively true moral propositions). Moreover, in his view, even if there is such a

disagreement, this does not support moral anti-realism. Singh develops three lines of argument against the inference from moral expert disagreement to moral anti-realism: first, such an inference is prone to overgeneralise to other fields; second, it presumes that there is at least one normative fact, which is an assumption that does not fit well with the rejection of moral facts; and third, agreement and disagreement on moral issues are orthogonal to the moral realism and anti-realism debate.

Meta-ethical pluralism is the view that our ordinary moral discourse contains a plurality of moral concepts. Moral discourse is thus much less uniform than commonly assumed. Consequently, ordinary use of moral terms cannot always be explained along the same lines. Critics of this position have alleged that it leaves no room for genuine disagreement, both on the level of ordinary discourse and in meta-ethics. For if parties to a dispute use different concepts, they are merely talking past each other, instead of having genuine disagreements. In his paper “Meta-ethical pluralism and disagreement”, **Stijn van Gorkum** attempts to rescue pluralism from these two charges. He points out ways in which ordinary speakers as well as meta-ethicists could have genuine disagreements even if we assume a pluralist picture of moral discourse.

This collection of articles focuses mostly on the epistemology and ontology of disagreements and their practical consequences. The perspective of philosophy – its reliance on rational argumentation and rules of logic – often offers substantial and useful insights. However, the philosophical method provides only one important set of tools and perspectives amongst other scientific approaches. Disagreements have complex social, psychological, cultural, historical, even genetic aspects and are thus ultimately interdisciplinary phenomena. Learning about disagreements – and how to live with them – is thus a modern research subject *par excellence* to which the current volume hopes to make its contribution.

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