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Resolving Disagreements

A Semantic and Epistemological Inquiry

Åke Wahlberg

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Inquiry

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Åke Wahlberg
Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology
Frankfurt am Main, Germany

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For Thamar, Lena, and Else

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1

Introduction

The phenomenon of disagreement is not only a pervasive trait of contemporary society but also the subject matter of vibrant debates in philosophy. Within philosophy, there are two broad branches of research where the generic phenomenon of disagreement is being studied: epistemology and philosophy of language. The branch of epistemology asks: what is the rationally correct response to a disagreement with peers? The branch of philosophy of language concerns itself with semantic questions in connection to disagreement and, more generally, with the very nature of this phenomenon.

In this book, I will relate the epistemological discourse to those semantic issues and to philosophy of language more generally. By doing this, I seek to demonstrate that the interpersonal assessment and specification of a disagreement entail epistemic elements bearing on the rational implications of peer disagreement and on the possibilities of resolving disagreements. Donald Davidson's influential reflections on the interpretation of language play a decisive part in this. Even though Davidson himself did not put much thought into the topic of disagreement per se, his general approach remains highly instructive for assessing this issue as well. This is because Davidson highlights how general epistemology regarding reasons for belief intersects with the epistemology of interpersonal

understanding. Drawing on his works, I argue that the exact interpersonal specification of a disagreement depends on the assessment of reasons for belief, including reasons for the apparently disputed proposition. Recurring to some of Davidson's later metasemantic considerations, I then suggest that this is ultimately because the constitution of meaning and mental content depends on social interaction. If true, this creates a new framework for reflecting on the notorious epistemological problems related to disagreement; it puts the epistemological aspects of disagreement in a new perspective. According to this perspective, the epistemological problems related to disagreement are closely tied to problems regarding interpersonal communication. It comes down to this: real-world disagreements among people who have roughly the same epistemically relevant capacities and have access to the same evidence are both an epistemic challenge and one of interpersonal understanding. The epistemic pressure possibly resulting from disagreement with peers needs to be balanced against the hermeneutic pressure to provide a plausible interpretation of the beliefs of the apparent opponent. Resolving disagreements, moreover, is as much a question of engendering mutual understanding as it is a question of exchanging reasons and of rational persuasion. These findings will not necessarily be of any interest in view of the most mundane cases of disagreement discussed in the literature. But they will be relevant to our reflections on area-specific disagreements where a certain amount of complexity and/or cultural diversity is present. This is the focus of my last chapter, which analyzes the phenomenon of (inter)religious disagreement.

It is important to note, from the outset, that this study does not question the relevance or pertinence of epistemological discussions of disagreement that do not account for the semantics of disagreement and for interpersonal interpretation. The project presented here is about enriching the debate. It is not about criticizing it or trying to replace it. For example, I ask: how do we know if an apparent disagreement represents a genuine disagreement? In social epistemology, this question is ignored, for good reasons, given the idealized character of the current debate. It is philosophically legitimate to ignore it. But it is also legitimate to reflect on it in connection to the epistemological problems surrounding disagreement, as I do in this book. This adds a new layer to the debate

without in any way challenging the aptness and usefulness of previous work on disagreement within epistemology.

Furthermore, the arguments have a somewhat conditional nature. I will not present a thorough defense of Davidson's program. Instead, I suggest what shape the phenomenon of disagreement might take provided that some crucial proposals put forth by Davidson are correct. Some aspects related to interpretation and charity are plausible even absent an adherence to Davidson, while some elements are more tightly bound to original strains of his thinking. At the very least, my considerations demonstrate the general relevance of metasemantic reflections to inquiries into the epistemological ramifications of disagreement. Thus, I hope to convincingly demonstrate the benefits of thinking about the epistemology of disagreement within a broader framework, which includes semantic and metasemantic considerations. And I hope to achieve this even for those who are not immediately prepared to accept the Davidsonian assumptions underlying some of my arguments.

To get there, some thorough reflections on the phenomenon of disagreement and a closer look at related concepts will be necessary. In particular, I will dedicate a fair amount of attention to the question what a disagreement is and what sets a genuine disagreement apart from merely apparent disagreements. It is important to get some clarity on this since the possibility that an apparent disagreement fails to represent a genuine disagreement is a driving factor in the Davidsonian framework that I propose. Some of those reflections, however, have a more technical character, in particular in Chaps. 4 and 5. For readers who are less interested in these more specific issues or are less versed in philosophy of language, it is possible to pass directly from Chap. 3 to Chap. 6 without losing the thread.

Here is how I proceed in some detail: *Chap. 2* introduces the epistemological discussion of disagreement in its basic tenets. Without endorsing any particular position, it describes what is at stake in the debate and, more fundamentally, what the epistemological relevance of interpersonal disagreement is in the first place.

Chapter 3 approaches the notion of disagreement from the perspective of semantics and the philosophy of language. It does so by first characterizing disagreement in semantic terms and then analyzing the

phenomenon of verbal disagreement. The most important aspect of this phenomenon in the present context is how it visualizes the relationship between language and propositional attitudes in light of disagreement.

Having concluded that disagreement, in its epistemologically relevant form, is something that occurs primarily at the level of propositional attitudes, *Chaps. 4 and 5* are dedicated to an inquiry into the nature of belief insofar as this nature is relevant to understanding disagreement. These considerations try to flesh out a common, and in my view correct, sentiment according to which a disagreement is a conflict at the level of propositional contents being the objects of beliefs: I believe some proposition *p*. You disbelieve that same proposition. That means: you and I have a disagreement. Or: I believe *p*, whereas you believe *q*, and *p* and *q* are incompatible. (The semantic characterization of disagreement provided in *Chap. 3* reflects this sentiment.) On closer inspection, it turns out that this picture, although not erroneous, raises some urgent questions pertaining to our understanding of the phenomenon of disagreement. Here, we enter what I prefer to call the *metaphysics of disagreement*: granted that we can give a fairly straightforward semantic explanation of what exactly a disagreement is in terms of propositional contents, the question remains: what is the relationship between rational agents believing those contents and those contents themselves? What is it for a rational agent to believe a proposition in the sense relevant for giving rise to a substantive disagreement with another agent? Without aspiring to give an exhaustive account of belief, the chapter examines what makes it correct for someone to attribute a specific propositional content to a belief held by another person. Relatedly, it examines what the notion of a propositional content refers to in the first place. It seeks to illuminate some aspects of believing that are relevant to our understanding of disagreement. The major conclusion emerging from these chapters is that a certain, mostly tacit understanding of the phenomenon of belief, underlying most theorizing on the epistemology of disagreement, obscures relevant aspects of the phenomenon of interpersonal disagreement. According to this understanding, beliefs are attitudes toward some kind of object of thought, presumably some kind of hypostatized object denoted by that-clauses used for attributing beliefs. By asking, in these chapters, what it *is* for agents to be related to propositional contents by means of believing—what our

concept of belief is designed to capture—I present a more exact and realistic picture of what belief is and what it is for beliefs of different people to be in conflict. On my picture, which is loosely based on Robert Stalnaker’s influential writings, beliefs are states of an agent that distinguish between relevant alternative possibilities. Moreover, instead of being treated as objects or constituents of beliefs, propositional contents are devices used to characterize those states of an agent. The occurrence of a conflict in belief between two agents depends on how the belief states of those agents can be reasonably characterized given their respective agency, broadly understood. This, furthermore, sets the stage for the introduction of Davidson’s account of interpretation where meaning and interpretation are closely intertwined, conceptually. In its last part, Chap. 5 utilizes Akeel Bilgrami’s theory of content and meaning to reflect on the repercussions of content holism for the phenomenon of disagreement. This, also, prepares the ground for Davidson’s holistic account of meaning and mental attitudes.

Building on these assessments of the phenomenon of belief and the notion of belief content, *Chap. 6*, finally, introduces Davidson’s thoughts on interpretation. This takes the discussion from the metaphysics of disagreement into its epistemology. Here, I will first argue that there is a tension between interpretation based on the principle of charity and the epistemological problem of peer disagreement: the idealized situation of a peer apparently disagreeing with me and there being no independent reasons for me to attribute a belief to her that I, according to my original evaluation of extant evidence, would consider false or unjustified, suggests that the apparent disagreement fails to be genuine. This yields a slightly different understanding of what the problem of peer disagreement amounts to. A peer disagreement is not a situation where an agent is being presented with clear-cut evidence in the form of a differing opinion challenging her own assessment of the issue at hand. Instead, given the nature of interpersonal interpretation, the situation is rather one in which an agent, based on the evidence she has at her disposal, must simultaneously assess whether a disagreement exists, exactly where it lies, and what the world is like. Rather than being confronted with a clear and distinctive piece of evidence in the form of a divergent opinion, she faces

a situation where she needs to strike a balance between her assessment of the issue at stake and her assessment of the beliefs of the other person.

In a further step, I describe in *Chap. 7* what I take to be the deeper moral of this. Drawing on Davidson's later writings on the topic of "triangulation" and on recent defenses of a Davidsonian metasemantics, I suggest that these epistemological peculiarities are a result of the social nature of meaning and thought. Here, the epistemology and the metaphysics of disagreement merge. The principle of charity is not merely an interpretative aid; it pertains to the very constitution of meaning and propositional content. In the most basic situations, meaning arises when different agents converge on what they take to be true and seek to explicate deviations from this. Due to this, disagreements are as much a disturbance of communication and intersubjective intelligibility as they are disruptive for any agent striving to entertain true beliefs.

Chapter 8 aims to demonstrate the relevance of this to real-world cases of disagreement. Here, I examine the nature of (inter)religious disagreement in the context of (inter)religious dialog. After having considered some general tenets of (inter)religious dialog pertinent to the possibility of (inter)religious disagreement, I turn to the debate on peer disagreement in religion. Paralleling the discussion of Davidson in Chaps. 6 and 7, I argue that the specification of disagreements requires argumentative dialog where reasons for belief need to be balanced against reasons for attributing specific beliefs to the other. A further consequence of the Davidsonian reflections is that the specification of religious disagreement requires shared epistemic criteria. Those shared criteria making a specification of disagreement possible, however, are at the same time what provides the *in principle* possibility of resolving the disagreement in the sense of deciding who is right. That is the good news.



2

The Epistemological Relevance of Disagreement

2.1 Peer Disagreement

People disagreeing is a common phenomenon in every area of life. We disagree ferociously about political, moral, and religious issues. With slightly less ferocity, we disagree about empirically and scientifically assessable facts. In matters of taste, we tend to disagree respectfully, at least when we regard matters of taste as pure matters of taste. Disagreement, in any event, is an inescapable feature of social life and of intellectual life in a social environment.

From an epistemological point of view, the decisive question concerning any of these areas is what impact a disagreement should have on us as rational agents: learning that other persons disagree with us, how should we react? What is the appropriate, rationally justified response?

But why, we must first ask, should a conflicting belief held by someone else have any impact *at all* on *my* doxastic conduct? If I have my reasons for believing certain things, why should I allow beliefs of other people to interfere with my own beliefs? Of course, nobody forces me to account for what others believe. Ignoring the beliefs of others, even if they seem to disagree with me, often has great practical and psychological benefits. At the same time, however, ignoring conflicting beliefs of other people

means ignoring further reasons, namely, reasons counting against my original belief.

In virtue of what, then, do conflicting beliefs of others present reasons bearing on my own beliefs? It is in virtue of the fact that other persons also strive to entertain true rather than false beliefs and are sensitive to reasons counting in favor of, or against, beliefs. If an agent disagrees with me about a belief that *p*, that is a reason for me to form the second-order belief that my reasoning leading me to believe that *p* might have been faulty. This, in turn, is because the other person is also a rational agent who can be expected to evaluate evidence in a reliable way, perhaps as reliably as I do. If she reacts differently to extant evidence, maybe I should as well, when there are no relevant differences between the two of us. If it is unknown what exact evidence my opponent has access to, moreover, her coming to a different conclusion might indicate that she has gathered relevant evidence that I have failed to account for. In either case, her disagreeing with me questions the accuracy and conclusiveness of my belief-forming process.

Even apart from that, the fact that a rational person believes non-*p* seems to be a *prima facie* reason for non-*p* and thus a reason counting directly against *p* irrespective of its second-order relevance. That is, the fact that somebody believes, or asserts, a proposition seems on its own, even apart from second-order indications, to present a reason for other people to believe that proposition and thus to disbelieve its negation.¹ By refusing to acknowledge such counter reasons constituted by the conflicting beliefs of my co-inquirers, if first or second order, my overall chances of acquiring true beliefs and excluding false beliefs from my belief system decline. After all, reasons relate to truth in terms of promoting true beliefs and working against false beliefs.

Ultimately, the phenomenon of disagreement pertains to rationality. As a rational person aiming for true beliefs, I ought to allow conflicting beliefs of other people to intervene with my own beliefs and let them have an impact on my assessment of my own doxastic perspective. To what extent this is true, and what follows from it in terms of rationally

¹ Maybe this kind of first-order reasons can be explicated in terms of second-order reasons.

appropriate responses to disagreement, is itself an object of fierce disagreement among epistemologists.²

The debate on the epistemological consequences of disagreement has centered on the phenomenon of *peer disagreement*. In short, this is the idea of different persons or communities disagreeing about a topic and there being no reasons for either of the parties to consider the other side inferior in any relevant sense.³ The notion of a peer is important since disagreements lacking this element—the peerhood of the opponents—are less problematic and to some extent less interesting. The opinion of a person we deem inferior to us in relevant aspects can be dismissed out of hand in a rationally legitimate way. For example, adult persons are rationally entitled to disregard the opinions of children in cases of disagreement where the cognitive discrepancy between adults and children is relevant for evaluating the issue at hand. (As we all know, this is not always the case. Children are often epistemically superior to adults: better memory, more attentive, etc.) Furthermore, disagreements with epistemic superiors, for example with branch-specific experts, are equally easy to dispel: the rational option, *ceteris paribus*, is to defer. Again, this holds only if the superiority of the other person is relevant to assessing the question at stake: a disagreement with a weather expert about questions related to romantic courtship does not necessarily invite deference (unless the weather is relevant to the success of the courtship). The hard epistemological problems concerning disagreement arise in view of peer

²In spite of their different views on the rational implications of peer disagreement, all participants in the debate would agree that disagreements in many cases provide reasons for belief revision in a very uncontroversial way. This is for example the case when the disagreement indicates that the opponent has access to additional evidence, or it is obvious that the opponent is better situated for assessing the issue at stake.

³The notion of “peer” is highly contentious and the term lacks an agreed upon meaning. Sometimes, the peer status entails shared evidence, sometimes not; sometimes it pertains to general intellectual capabilities only and sometimes to a more narrowly defined competence relevant for assessing the disputed proposition. For a useful taxonomy of different definitions, see Harvey Stegel, “Argumentation and the epistemology of disagreement,” in *Virtues of Argumentation. Proceedings of the 10th International Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA), 22–26 May 2013*, eds. Dima Mohammed and Marcin Lewiński, 14–15. Oliver Wiertz argues, correctly in my view, that the idea of epistemic peerhood ought to be treated as a loose approximation if it is to have any relevance at all for reflections on real-world disagreement, see Oliver Wiertz, “Die Vernünftigkeit religiösen Glaubens im Zeitalter religiöser Vielfalt und der Dissens unter epistemisch Ebenbürtigen,” *Theologie und Philosophie* 95 (2020): 390.

disagreement. In those cases, neither perseverance nor deference can be said to be default options. In facing a disagreement with someone whom we consider our peer in all relevant aspects, it is far from clear what the rationally correct response would be. We cannot legitimately dismiss her opinion, it seems, but deference is not an obviously reasonable option either.

What should we do, then, when encountering a person who disagrees with us and we have no apparent reason⁴ to discredit her qualifications and knowledgeability?⁵ What is the rationally correct response to genuine peer disagreement? There are a number of different positions on this in the literature. We can distinguish broadly between conciliatory positions proposing the mutual reduction of epistemic confidence,⁶ if not belief suspension, in the face of peer disagreement, and steadfast positions according to which we might stick to our guns in a broad range of disagreements without having any epistemic regrets about that.⁷ This is of course a very cursory description of a highly complex debate, but it is sufficient for my purposes. I will not take a stand on these issues, but the epistemological discussion as such forms the background of my general argument in this essay. I assume that interpersonal disagreement is of

⁴Of course, one reason would be exactly the fact that she disagrees. To what extent the peerhood of the disagreeing person can be legitimately questioned on the sole basis of this is controversial. According to a plausible principle called “Independence,” the revocation of peerhood on those grounds is not rationally legitimate. This principle tells us not to withhold the peer status from a person in the light of a disagreement about a proposition *p* on the sole basis of her disagreeing with us about *p* or on the basis of the evidence supporting our belief in *p*. David Christensen provides a canonical formulation:

Independence: In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another person’s belief about *P*, to determine how (if at all) to modify one’s own belief about *P*, one should do so in a way that is independent of the reasoning behind one’s own initial belief about *P*.

David Christensen, “Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy,” *Philosophy Compass* 4/5 (2009): 758. See also Chap. 6, Sect. 6.6, in this book for a discussion of this and related questions.

⁵In many everyday contexts, we are probably entitled to the *prima facie* presumption that other adult persons are our peers *qua* rational agents. In other contexts, in branch-specific conversations among experts, for instance, we might need positive reasons—like the presence of a college diploma—for concluding that another person is a peer.

⁶For this position, see David Christensen, “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” *The Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 187–217.

⁷See, for example, Thomas Kelly, “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement,” in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology. Volume 1*, eds. Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 167–196.

epistemic relevance in the sense that differing views of other people might affect the justification of an agent's beliefs. Relatedly, I assume that disagreements known to a person might assert a rational pressure on that person to adjust her own beliefs, given some reasonable suppositions regarding the epistemic status of her opponent.

2.2 Cognitive Disparities

While sidestepping the debate on the appropriate response to peer disagreement, at least for now, I would like to consider an enrichment to this discussion put forth by Robert Audi. One of his many insights on this topic is that disagreement, taken as an interpersonal conflict on whether a belief is true or not, is a subspecies of a broader phenomenon that he brands *cognitive disparity*: “Cognitive disparity, as I conceive it here, is a kind of difference—usually also yielding a tension—between cognitive elements.”⁸ These elements can be differences in strength of conviction,⁹ disposition to believe certain things, differences in inferential propensities, etc. Accordingly, every kind of interpersonal¹⁰ difference in the belief-forming process that is relevant to the doxastic outlook of the persons involved may engender cognitive disparities. Disparity thus encompasses a broad range of cognitive phenomena, and a case of disparity need not entail outright disagreement. Two people manifesting a cognitive disparity might both believe the same proposition, while their respective acts of believing it exhibit some differences of epistemological relevance: “how ‘far apart’ people are intellectually is not just a matter of what they believe.”¹¹ By outlining his conception of cognitive disparity, Audi makes visible that the phenomenon of disagreement about a proposition—the target phenomenon of mainstream discussions in the

⁸ Robert Audi, “Cognitive Disparities: Dimensions of Intellectual Diversity and the Resolution of Disagreement,” in *The Epistemology of Disagreement. New Essays*, eds. David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 205.

⁹ Other authors have of course also accounted for cases of disagreement where the disputants believe the same proposition but with relevantly different strength in terms of subjective probability (graded credence). Audi uses a different terminology here, where disparities in credence do not constitute disagreements *proper*.

¹⁰ Audi mentions intrapersonal disparity but focusses on the interpersonal case.

¹¹ Audi, “Cognitive Disparities,” 220.