# Disagreement and Truth

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Sometimes when people disagree, we know that at least one of the disagreeing parties must be wrong. For example, suppose that you believe there are 20 people on the bus and I believe there are fewer. Then we know that at least one of us is wrong. Some disagreements, however, seem not to be like that. For example, when I believe that swimming in the lake is pleasant, and you believe that it is not, it is not so clear that one of us must be wrong. Perhaps it pleases me, so I am right to believe it to be pleasant, and it does not please you, so it is wrong for you to believe it to be pleasant. To have a label for this, let's say that the latter type of disagreement is "discretionary", the former not.

However, there is a simple argument that seems to show, from plausible-sounding premisses about truth and its significance, that in every disagreement someone must be wrong. This would mean that there are no discretionary disagreements, despite appearances. The current article explores this apparent connection between truth and disagreement. It explains the simple argument in several versions, presents some purported counterexamples to its conclusion and discusses how the argument could be resisted, or how its conclusion can be made to seem more palatable.[1]

## *The Simple Argument*

The Simple Argument relies on two simple and seemingly hard to deny assumptions. The first assumption is about truth, namely that instances of the so-called equivalence schema hold. The equivalence schema is "it is true that *p* iff *p*."; an instance can be generated by substituting a sentence for "*p*" in it, for example: "it is true that Leo is from Linz iff Leo is from Linz". Notoriously, some instances of the schema, the liar

[1] This chapter covers some of the same ground as Kölbel 2003. However, the presentation is more general and avoids some distractions. I have framed this chapter as a problem about disagreement in belief. However, similar issues arise for disagreement in what people assert, i.e. when one person asserts the negation of what another asserts. Some of what I say can be transferred *mutatis mutandis*. However, it is also possible to approach the issues differently in the two cases (compare, e.g., Egan 2007, Rabern 2012, Kölbel 2013 or Pagin 2016).

instances, lead to contradiction, so at the very least, some instances of the schema need to be rejected (see Horwich 1998).

Secondly, there is the assumption that the truth-value of what we believe has a certain normative significance for believers: one ought to believe something only if it is true. In other words, believing something that fails to be true constitutes a mistake.[2]

In summary, the two assumptions are:

***Equivalence***: All non-liar instances of the schema "It is true that *p* iff *p*." hold.

***Normativity***: One ought to believe only what is true. In other words: for anyone *a*, and any proposition *p*: if *p* is not true then it is a mistake for *a* to believe *p*.

We can use these assumptions to prove that whenever one person believes that *p* and another person believes that not-*p*, at least one of them is making a mistake:

SA1

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | A believes that *p*, B believes that not-*p*. | (assumption) |
| 2. | If *p* then it is not true that not-*p*. | (from ***Equivalence*** for non-liar *p*). |
| 3. | If not-*p* then it is not true that *p*. | (from ***Equivalence*** for non-liar *p*) |
| 4. | *p* | (assumption for constructive dilemma) |
| 5. | It is not true that not-*p*. | (2, 4, modus ponens) |
| 6. | B is making a mistake. | (1, 5, ***Normativity***) |
| 7. | not-*p* | (assumption for constructive dilemma) |
| 8. | It is not true that *p*. | (3, 7, modus ponens) |
| 9. | A is making a mistake. | (1, 8, ***Normativity***) |
| 10. | A is making a mistake or B is making a mistake. | (4–9, constructive dilemma). |

Believers A and B, as well as *p*, the object of belief in question, were chosen arbitrarily. So, the argument seems to show generally that whenever two thinkers respectively believe and disbelieve the same object of belief, one of them must be mistaken. In particular, the argument does seem to undermine the impression of a contrast, cited at the beginning, between disagreements where we know that one party must have made a mistake and those where we don't know (discretionary disagreements). The argument, if successful, shows that we always know that one party has made a mistake when one thinker believes that *p* and another believes that not-*p*, whatever *p* may be.

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[2] Saying that it constitutes a mistake just means that some norm is being violated (the truth norm), and this is independent of whether there are other (possibly weightier) norms and whether those are being adhered to or violated. In other words, the norm expressed by ***Normativity*** is a *pro tanto* norm.

Strictly speaking, there is a tiny restriction on permissible substitutions for "*p*": step 2. and 3. are licensed by ***Equivalence*** only if the the object of belief *p* is not liar-susceptible. But this restriction does not seem to affect many disagreements. Even that restriction, however, would disappear in an alternative version of the argument that does not rely on ***Equivalence*** and employs a slightly modified schematic version of ***Normativity*** that does not involve the expression "true":

***Normativity****: All instances of the following schema hold: "For all *a*: if not-*p*, then it is a mistake for *a* to believe that *p"*.

The Argument then runs:

SA2

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | A believes that *p*, B believes that not-*p*. | (assumption) |
| 2. | *p* | (assumption for constructive dilemma) |
| 3. | not-not-*p*. | (2) |
| 4. | B is making a mistake. | (1, 3, ***Normativity****) |
| 5. | not-*p* | (assumption for constructive dilemma) |
| 6. | A is making a mistake. | (1, 5, ***Normativity****) |
| 7. | A is making a mistake or B is making a mistake. | (2–6, constructive dilemma). |

***Normativity**** can be seen as capturing the main content of the truth norm ***Normativity*** without use of the truth-predicate (the schematic, metalinguistic form being owed to the ineliminability of the truth-predicate, following, e.g. Horwich 1998)[3].

Thus, SA1 and SA2 seem to show that there is an important connection between disagreement and the normativity of truth as captured by ***Normativity*** or ***Normativity****. This connection seems to guarantee that whenever there is disagreement someone is making a mistake.

Now, some have responded to the difficulty by claiming that merely believing something and believing its negation is not sufficient for disagreement (see, e.g. McFarlane 2007, 2014; Francén 2010; Coliva & Moruzzi 2014, Baghramian & Coliva 2019). Thus, for example, when I believe that it is Monday and you (simultaneously) believe that it is not Monday, you believe the negation of what I believe, but we may not disagree—we might be in different timezones so that we are both right. So, even

[3] Others may prefer to articulate a truth-free version of ***Normativity*** thus:
***Normativity*****: For every *a, p*: if not-*p*, then if *a* believes that *p*, then *a* is making a mistake.
This would require quantification into sentential position. For the view that many natural languages have (non-substitutional) sentential quantification, see Künne 2003, ch. 6.

though (arguably) you believe the negation of what I believe, we do not really disagree. Disagreement requires more than that one person believe the negation of what another person believes.

However, this does not yet remove the problem created by SA1 and SA2. We may define "disagreement" whichever way we like: it will still be problematic to accept the conclusion that whenever one person believes that *p* and another believes that not-*p*, one must have made a mistake. For we still have the impression that when I believe that swimming is pleasant and you believe it is not, we may both be right, while if I believe there are 20 people on the bus, and you believe there are not, we know that one of us must be wrong. The challenge is to say what is wrong with SA1 and SA2; or else to explain away the persistent impression that there are possible cases where one person believes the negation of what another person believes and neither is making any mistake. In what follows, I shall for simplicity be assuming that whenever two people disagree, one believes the negation of something the other believes.

## *Resisting the Simple Argument*

The two versions of the argument, then, are in conflict with the impression, cited at the beginning, that some disagreements are discretionary. When I believe that swimming in the lake is pleasant and you believe that it is not, then it is possible that neither of us is making any mistake, or so it seems. So we have a choice: either reject the initial impression and say that one of us has made a mistake about whether swimming in the lake is pleasant. Or find fault with the two arguments SA1 and SA2. In this section, I shall start with the latter option and discuss how one might challenge the argument.

What could one possibly challenge in these arguments? Let us concentrate on the minimal version, SA2. One could challenge the inference rule of constructive dilemma, which is used to generate the conclusion. Intuitionists, for example, do not accept this rule (see Wright 1992, 2001). However, this does not get us very far, for one can still derive a similar conclusion relying merely on reductio ad absurdum:

SA3

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | A believes that *p*, B believes that not-*p*. | (assumption) |
| 2. | Neither A nor B is making a mistake. | (assumption for reductio) |
| 3. | *p* | (assumption for reductio) |
| 4. | not-not-*p*. | (3) |
| 5. | B is making a mistake. | (1, 4, ***Normativity****) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 6. | not-*p* | (2, 3, 5, reductio) |
| 7. | A is making a mistake. | (1, 6, ***Normativity****) |
| 8. | Not-(neither A nor B is making a mistake.) | (2, 5, 7, reductio) |

Thus, even without relying on constructive dilemma, we can disprove that none of the two disagreeing parties has made a mistake.

The obvious assumption to challenge, then, is ***Normativity****. But it seems undeniable that it is a mistake to believe that *p* if not-*p*. I take it that the only credible way to challenge ***Normativity**** is to restrict its generality in some way, and to argue that the truth of the restricted version is what is behind the impression that ***Normativity**** is true. But how can we make that plausible? How can we explain that such a persuasive principle is in fact false?

Let us consider again the case where one person, call her "Duck", believes that swimming in the lake is pleasant while another person, call her "Cat", believes that it is not. Now, swimming in the lake pleases Duck, while it does not please Cat. In general, it seems that judging something to be pleasant is correct when it pleases one, and incorrect, when it does not. So it seemed that both Duck and Cat were correct in their respective assessments, neither of them wrong.

Applying ***Normativity**** to this case and instantiating the resulting universal for Duck, we can deduce this claim:

N1 If swimming in the lake is not pleasant, then it is a mistake for Duck to believe that swimming in the lake is pleasant.

Now, it may be fine for *Duck* to believe this consequence of ***Normativity****. Duck will not accept the antecedent of N1, so she won't apply modus ponens and arrive at the conclusion that it is wrong for her to believe that swimming is pleasant. (And if Duck did believe the antecedent of N1, she would do so incorrectly.) However, consider what happens if Cat (or anyone else with hydrophobic dispositions) believes N1: Since Cat will accept the antecedent (and it is correct for her to do so), she can detach and conclude that it is a mistake for Duck to believe that swimming is pleasant. But this is not a correct conclusion for her to draw, as we saw. So it is not correct for her to believe N1 in the first place.

So how can we explain the appeal of ***Normativity**** given that it is so easy to generate counterexamples? There will be many sentences that can be substituted for *p* in ***Normativity**** that will result in unproblematic instances: namely all sentences

expressing contents of belief that are equally correct or incorrect to believe independently of who believes them and when. Moreover, all instances that replace *a* in ***Normativity**** with a term referring to a given thinker can be believed correctly *by that thinker*—just as it was ok for Duck to believe N1. So the appeal of ***Normativity**** is simply due to the fact that we tend to concentrate on its unproblematic instances, and we fail to see its false instances.

Compare the following general principle: "When one buys shoes, one should buy one's own size.". Doesn't this immediately sound right? It does so because it seems right for the most obvious intended range of application. But once you consider cases where one is buying shoes not for oneself but for someone else, the principle no longer sounds right. I am suggesting that a similar effect is responsible for the appeal of ***Normativity****.

The mentioned tendency to overlook false instances is also facilitated by a certain theoretical bias in philosophical theorising about the contents of thought and speech. Contemporary theorising in this area is heavily influenced by Frege and Russell, who both operated with notions of propositional content (Russell's *propositions*, Frege's *thoughts*) according to which these contents have absolute truth-values. It is therefore understandable that philosophers influenced by this tradition will accept ***Normativity*** (without "*") without hesitation. But since they allow only propositions with absolute truth-values as objects of belief, a sentence like "It's Monday." or "Swimming in the lake is pleasant." do not express a unique proposition. They need completion in order to determine a unique proposition, as in, e.g. "Swimming in the lake is pleasant for Duck.". So they accept ***Normativity,*** but deny that it can be used to generate SA1 for problematic replacements for "*p*" (steps 6. and 9 can't be deduced in those cases). At the same time they will reject ***Normativity**** (and thereby SA2), for it has problematic instances (e.g. *p*="It's Monday."; *p*="Swimming in the lake is pleasant."). Saying that it is a mistake to believe a proposition that is not true does not entail ***Normativity****.

Let us call this the "classic response" to SA1 and SA2. (Examples of the classic response are Lopez de Sa 2007, Stojanovic 2007, Dowell 2011, Snyder 2013, Coliva & Moruzzi 2014, Baghramian & Coliva 2018, Zakkou 2019, Pearson 2022 and many more.) The classic response involves the view that the proper objects of belief have absolute truth-values, and it incurs the obligation to provide a way of deciding which sentences express a unique proposition and can be used to generate correct instances of

***Normativity****. Thus, they will have to deny that Cat is disbelieving what Duck believes when Duck believes that swimming in the lake is pleasant and Cat believes that it is not. On this view, there simply is no unique object of belief that is expressed by "Swimming in the lake is pleasant." (even if the lake in question is the same), and Duck and Cat are not disagreeing in any sense that entails that one believes the negation of what the other believes.

Some proponents of the classic response have explained that while Cat does not believe the negation of what Duck believes, the contents believed are nevertheless incompatible on the presumption that Duck and Cat are relevantly alike (e.g. that Duck and Cat tend to be pleased by the same things). Sometimes such background presumptions or conversational presuppositions can explain the impression of conflict.

The commitments of the classic response are too much to stomach for a different class of theorist, who therefore take a different route and reject the idea that the objects of belief have absolute truth-values—let's call them "perspectivalists". (Examples are Lewis 1979, Kaplan 1977/89, Gibbard 1990, 2003, Kölbel 2002, 2013, 2015a&b, MacFarlane 2005, 2014, Lasersohn 2005, Recanati 2007, Torre 2010, Egan 2010, 2012, Zeman 2015, Kindermann 2016, Dinges 2017, Coppock 2018)[4]. According to them, Duck does indeed believe the very same content (object of belief) that Cat rejects. On the classic view, whether it is correct for someone to believe a content depends only on the objective state of the world, i.e. on a factor that is assumed to be the same for any (actual) believer at any time. But according to perspectivalists, correctness depends also on factors that can vary from one believer to another, or from one time to another. Thus, it can be correct for one thinker at one time to believe a perspectival content, yet not be correct to believe the very same content for another thinker or at another time. Perspectivalists will neither accept ***Normativity*** nor ***Normativity****, but rather restrict or qualify it.

Let's look at one of these accounts, namely David Lewis's account of "centred propositions" as objects of belief (Lewis 1979). Centred propositions are (or at least determine) sets of centred worlds, where a centred world is an ordered pair $\langle w, \langle a, t \rangle \rangle$

[4] Within the group here described as "perspectivalists", MacFarlane 2014 emphasizes the distinction between, what he calls "assessment relativists" and "non-indexical contextualists". He claims that assessment relativists are in a better position to model "retraction phenomena" (on this claim, see Kölbel 2015). This distinction is not relevant for current concerns, since both types of perspectivalism share the same type of response to SA1 and SA2.

of a possible world *w* and a centre <*a*, *t*>, in turn consisting of a thinker *a* and a time *t*. Now, every thinker *a* at any time *t* has a particular centred world that is his or her centred world ("her predicament"), namely the centred world <*w*, <*a*, *t*>> consisting of the thinker's world *w* (the actual world) and the centre <*a*, *t*>. On this account, then, it is correct at a world *w* for a thinker *a* at a time *t*, to believe a centred proposition *C*, just if <*w*, <*a*, *t*>> is a member of *C*. Thus, on this account, only a version of Normativity* is acceptable, that is restricted to instances where the sentence substituting *p* is a sentence that expresses a centred proposition that is insensitive to the centre (it's truth-value does not vary with the centre). We also get a relativised version of ***Normativity*** and ***Normativity**** that holds generally:

***Normativity*$^{P}$**: All instances of the following schema hold: "For all *w*, *a*, *t*: if the centred proposition that not-*p* contains <*w*, <*a*, *t*>>, then in *w* it is a mistake for *a* to believe the centred proposition that *p"*.

***Normativity*$^{P}$** does not allow us to disprove that neither Duck nor Cat has made a mistake. But there is a subclass of centred propositions for which it does allow us to disprove it: the class of centred proposition *C* where we have the information that *C* contains a centred world <*w*, <*s*, *t*>> iff for all *s** and *t**, *C* also contains <*w*, <*s**, *t**>>. (These have been called the "boring" or "portable" centred propositions.) Thus we can still show that if you believe there are 20 people on the bus and I believe there are fewer, at least one of us has made a mistake.

I conclude that perspectival accounts of the objects of belief therefore have a coherent explanation of why ***Normativity*** and ***Normativity**** are unacceptable despite first appearances. Their account of the objects of belief provides a simple general principle about when one is mistaken in believing a content. This general principle still allows us to show for some disagreements (like that about whether there are 20 people on the bus) that at least one party must have made a mistake. Thus it preserves our initial impression of a contrast between discretionary and non-discretionary cases of one person believing that *p* and another believing that not-*p*.

To sum up the results of this section: the intuitionist move of rejecting constructive dilemma could not prevent a proof that it is not the case that no-one has made a mistake. The classic response is able to stop SA1 and SA2 by denying that the problematic cases, such as Duck's and Cat's beliefs about whether swimming in the lake is pleasant, are

cases where the same proposition is believed and disbelieved. The perspectivalist response was able to maintain the idea that Duck and Cat believe contradictory contents, but it stopped SA1 and SA2 in a different way, by replacing ***Normativity*** and ***Normativity**** with a general but relativised principle.

## *Living with the Simple Argument's Conclusion*

After exploring ways of resisting SA1 and SA2, I shall now discuss a different response, namely that of accepting the conclusion: accepting that when one thinker believes that *p* and another believes that not-*p* one of them is committing a mistake. Let's call this the "absolutist" response.

Now, probably there are cases where no-one actually wants to take an absolutist line, such as for example the case where I believe that it's Monday and you simultaneously believe that it is not Monday. If our beliefs concern different sides of the international date line, we could both be right. Let's grant that this sort of case will usually attract either the classic or the perspectivalist response.[5] However, when it comes to whether swimming in the lake is pleasant (and other problematic cases), there may be those who want to accept the conclusion of the Simple Argument and insist that either Duck, who believes that it's pleasant, or Cat, who believes that it is not, is mistaken. This view is in conflict with our initial impression that this is a discretionary disagreement, i.e. with our impression that Duck and Cat might both be right, and that it might be that neither of them has made any mistake. So how could one "explain away" our initial impression?

Those who take this sort of line will often make use of a distinction between two different kinds of violation, for example between "mistakes" and "faults" (see e.g. Schafer 2011, Hills 2013, Wyatt 2018, Zouhar 2020; see also Zeman & Hincu forthcoming for discussion). Thus, they might say that even though strictly speaking one of the views (that it is pleasant, or that it is not) is untrue, and even though believing something untrue constitutes a mistake, this is nevertheless not necessarily a fault. Whether Duck or Cat is at fault depends on how they would respond to swimming in

[5] In principle one could of course explore the view that even in this case, one of the two must be mistaken. The story could go like this: there is only one relevant location or set of locations (say, e.g., those along the Greenwich meridian), and strictly this provides the standard of whether such a belief about weekdays is true. Of course, we don't care that much about correctness against that standard, except when we are concerned with some place along the meridian … .

the lake. We are mostly interested in avoiding faults, hence our mistaken impression that the disagreement between Duck and Cat is discretionary. In fact, however, one of the two beliefs must be a mistake, because the content believed is not true. The strategy is to dissociate the norm of believing only what is true, and the corresponding "mistake" involved in believing something untrue, from another norm we are pursuing, and which we regard as more important, namely that of avoiding faults. In our example, "faultlessness" could be said to consist in judging things to be pleasant in line with one's dispositions to be pleased by these things.

This general sort of pattern can be used in several areas of discourse for which the possibility of discretionary disagreements has been discussed: discourse regarding matters of taste, including gustatory evaluation; funniness; aesthetic evaluation; moral evaluation; epistemic possibility; probability.

One important difficulty for absolutism is that it is unclear why thinkers should be said to believe contents that do not correspond to their belief forming dispositions. A sensible principle of charity seems to demand that we attribute to thinkers beliefs that are likely to be true when these thinkers have exercised their belief-forming dispositions normally and under favourable conditions. However, the absolutist claims that the normal exercise of belief-forming dispositions under favourable conditions, while making it likely that the beliefs are faultless, does not make it likely that they are true. This makes one wonder how the absolutist's attribution of belief contents is constrained (if not by the normal belief-forming dispositions of thinkers).

For example, when Duck believes that swimming is pleasant and Cat believes that it is not, it may be that both are faultless, presumably because each believes in line with the principle "believe a things to be pleasant only if it pleases you!". According to the absolutist, however one of two cases holds: 1. the proposition that swimming is pleasant is true, and Cat believes the false proposition that it is not; or 2. the proposition that swimming is pleasant is not true and Duck mistakenly believes that proposition. Consider the first case: what is the motivation for attributing to Cat this false belief? Cat forms beliefs of this kind, i.e. those involving the concept of pleasantness, in such a way as to make it likely that she believes a thing to be pleasant only if it pleases her. This ipso facto helps her conform to the important requirement to avoid faults, and in this case she actually succeeds in this. Why should Cat's belief be taken to have a propositional content that is in fact false, even though it is a belief that is in line with

the most important belief-forming norm, namely the demand for faultlessness? Analogous questions can be raised regarding the second case.

A second difficulty is that it is mysterious what determines which of these two cases holds. Perhaps there is a thinker, actual or hypothetical, whose pleasure responses are the measure for the truth (not faultlessness) of all other thinkers' judgements about pleasantness? This seems far-fetched and unmotivated. We cannot motivate this idea, for example, by appeal to the norms that govern our belief forming dispositions. For these make opposite demands on, e.g., Duck and Cat. Perhaps the absolutist could enlist the support of some of the classicist authors already mentioned and say that "Swimming in the lake is pleasant." is generic and refers contextually to a generally applicable pleasantness standard (e.g. Snyder 2013, Pearson 2022). This will help only in those cases where a generic interpretation is appropriate, and it will remain unclear how it is decided whether it is Duck or Cat who is believing a falsehood.

It may be easier to motivate absolutism in some of the other areas in which the possibility of discretionary disagreements has been discussed. Let us briefly discuss one such case: epistemic modality (aesthetics and morality come to mind as further examples of areas where the prospects for dealing with this problem seem better).

Suppose Opti believes that the keys might be in the drawer, and Pessi believes that it is not the case that they might be in the drawer (i.e. that they can't be in the drawer). Then there is also a sense that Opti and Pessi could both be right, namely if the information available to Opti does not rule out that the keys are in the drawer, while Pessi's information does. If in fact the keys are not in the drawer we have a rationale for choosing between the case where Opti makes a mistake and that where Pessi makes a mistake: might *p* is false if *p* is false.

On this absolutist view of epistemic modality, the proposition that the keys might be in the drawer, and the proposition that the keys are in the drawer, would be true in just the same cases. However, belief in the proposition that the key's might be in the drawer is governed by the important norm that one should believe it only if one's available evidence does not rule out that they are in the drawer (and violating this norm constitutes a fault). By contrast, belief in the proposition that the keys are in the drawer is governed by the important norm that one should believe it only if the keys are in the drawer (and violating this norm constitutes a fault). Thus, on this version of absolutism, there can be distinct propositions that are true in the same possible cases, and these

"hyperintensional" differences between propositions have an effect on the norms of faultlessness that govern believing these propositions.

To conclude, an absolutist response to the simple argument seems promising at most in some areas. Such a response always faces the difficulty of having to explain why the propositional content believed does not correspond to the governing norms guiding belief-formation. It also faces the difficulty of explaining which of the two disagreeing parties is mistaken—though there may be areas where such explanations seem more feasible than in others (the example of epistemic modality was discussed).

## Conclusion:

There is a very simple argument (with several versions) that yields the conclusion that if two thinkers disagree (one thinker believes something and another thinker disbelieves what the first believes), at least one of them has made a mistake. This challenges the impression that it is possible to have discretionary disagreements on some topics, i.e. disagreements where neither party may have made a mistake. We have seen that the classic response saves the impression that in the relevant cases there is no mistake, by denying that in those cases one person in fact believes what the other disbelieves. The perspectivalist response preserves the idea that one party believes what the other rejects, but also preserves that neither has made a mistake. This is achieved by introducing a more general account of propositional contents of belief (perspectival content). Finally, we looked at the absolutist response, which, at least in selected cases, accepts the conclusion of the simple argument and explains away the impression that no-one has made a mistake: in fact, no-one is guilty of any fault, and this misleads us into thinking that no-one has made any mistake.[6]

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