

# The nature and scope of faultless disagreement

It is well-known that the phenomenon of disagreement affects scientific controversies and mathematical issues – so-called *objective matters* – as well as moral disputes and taste judgments – so-called *subjective matters*. In the last two decades, disagreements in subjective areas of discourse have gained quite a bit of popularity in philosophy of language. The peculiarity of taste or ethics disputes is that people feel disagreements as *faultless*. Let us see an example. Bob says: "Eggplants are tasty" and his friend Margaret says: "No, you're wrong, eggplants are not tasty at all". The feeling we have is attempt to figure out who is mistaken is doomed to failure since there is no fact of the matter concerning the tastiness of eggplants.

Several authors relied on this datum for different purposes. Among them, two are worthy emphasising.

1. Crispin Wright argued that faultless disagreement is one of the criteria for distinguishing subjective and objective areas of discourse. Wright considers the following principle, called *cognitive command*.

It is a priori that differences of opinion formulated within (a) discourse, unless excusable as a result of vagueness in a disputed statement, or in the standards of acceptability, or variation in personal evidence thresholds, so to speak, will involve something which may properly be regarded as a cognitive shortcoming.

[Wright (1992), p. 55]

Subjective disagreements exert a failure of the cognitive command, which amounts to the view that such disagreements are faultless. In contrast, in mathematical or scientific discourse the cognitive command seems to hold. Let us call the *descriptive dogma* the idea that faultless disagreement concerns subjective areas of discourse only.

2. Faultless disagreement has been advocated as one of the main motivations for the revival of the old doctrine of truth-relativism. Among others, Max Kölbel (2003) and Peter Lasersohn (2005) contend that we can account for faultless disagreement only if we relativize the truth predicate. This insight

hinges on the tenet that notion of faultlessness involves that neither A nor B is at fault because both are saying something true. This *semantic* reading of faultlessness is countenanced as soon as we admit that, in ethics or aesthetics discourses, that the truth predicate is relative to the ethical or aesthetical personal perspectives or standard of evaluations of the disputants and that there is no way of picking out the “right” perspective since there is no right perspective. Thus, since the truth-values of semantic contents are relative to perspectives, the connection between truth and mistake becomes perspectival too. Kölbel argues «It is a mistake to believe a proposition that is not true in one’s own perspective».<sup>1</sup> Hence, Bob is not at fault because in his perspective it is true that eggplants are tasty and, *mutatis mutandis*, the same holds for Margaret. Let us call the thesis that only truth-relativism can account for faultless disagreement the *explanatory dogma*.

This paper discusses both dogmas and argues that they do not offer an adequate characterization of faultless disagreement.

The descriptive dogma is discarded once we realize that there are faultless disagreement case in objective areas of discourse. The case I discuss is a disagreement in set theory: Ernie claims that Zermelo-Fraenkel’s axiomatic system is the only true axiomatization of set theory, whereas his opponent Johnny claims that Von Neumann – Bernays – Gödel’s system is the only true axiomatization of set theory. I highlight the benefits and costs of the two systems and show that there are no mathematical reasons for preferring one to the other. Hence, this case can be properly regarded as a faultless disagreement case: there are more faultless disagreements in earth than have been dreamt of in philosophy so far.

The explanatory dogma may be dismissed along the following lines. The semantic reading fostered by the relativist amounts to a too perspectival and subjective notion of faultlessness that looses the connection with the intuition it seeks to vindicate. Let us look at the disagreement from the perspective of Bob: Bob is right and Margaret is mistaken. If we switch the perspective, Margaret is right and Bob is mistaken. Thus, it turns out that the relativistic account of faultless disagreement does not keep what it promises. Indeed, it should guarantee a strong semantic notion, viz. both disputants are speaking true. But since the notion of truth is relative, we come up with a notion which involves that what is said by Margaret is false (in a perspective); hence, there is always someone who is at fault. But this is an unwelcome result, since it does not rescue the intuition that no one is at fault *tout court*.

This analysis will lead me to claim that we’d better give up both the descriptive and the explanatory dogmas since they fail to capture the nature and scope of faultless disagreement.

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<sup>1</sup>Kölbel (2003), p. 70.

In closing, I hint at a new reading of faultlessness that accounts for the data gathered from the analysis of the two dogmas. This view provides an *epistemic* interpretation of the notion of faultlessness that relies on the idea that the opponents are at fault since the evidence bearing on a topic equally supports their views.

## References

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