STUDIES IN THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Faultless Disagreement

A Defense of Contextualism
in the Realm of Personal Taste

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Introduction

> Three guests of mine differ on what is good;
> Their various palates call for various food.
> What shall I serve? What not? What makes one glad,
> You don't enjoy; what you like, they find bad.
> —— Horace[1]

People fight a lot. About different topics, in different ways, by different means and with different results: in many cases they manage to solve their disagreements, but often enough they find themselves in a situation where, gladly or sadly, they can only agree to disagree. One might find this regrettable—wouldn't it be nice to reach a state of universal harmony? Or one might praise our conflict culture for its intellectual and entertainment value—wouldn't life without controversy at the very least be awfully boring? But the assessment of this situation aside, it seems clear that there is hardly any topic on which we have reached global agreement. Disagreement is just ubiquitous: for virtually any question there seem to be two people who disagree.

As trivial as this observation might sound, it has a remarkable consequence: people do not only disagree about objective matters; they also disagree about subjective ones. Consider two friends, Hannah and Sarah, who wonder about whether licorice is tasty. Assume they have the following exchange:

(1)   (a)   Hannah: Licorice is tasty.
      (b)   Sarah: Licorice is not tasty.

Whether licorice is tasty seems to be a paradigm example of a subjective matter. And yet, Hannah and Sarah disagree.

What makes this finding so remarkable? If we look at disagreements about objective matters, we immediately know that at most one of the parties involved is right. We might not know which of the parties is right, but we do know that at most one of them is. The other one must be wrong. When we look at disagreements about subjective matters from a bird's eye perspective, though, we intuitively hold the opposite view. Take the case of (1). Suppose that Hannah likes licorice and that Sarah hates it. Given this, neither of them seems to be at fault. They seem to have what has been called a *faultless disagreement*.

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[1]   Quoted from Montaigne

But what makes faultless disagreements so remarkable? Well, given that truth is objective, faultless disagreements should not be possible. Each and every exchange should either be a disagreement or a case in which neither party is at fault. No exchange should be both. But exchange (1) does seem to be both. So could it be that truth is not objective? More precisely and much worse, could it be that truth itself is a subjective matter: that it is relative to something like personal predilections? If so, wouldn't this mean that we have to give up one of the keystones not only of analytic philosophy but all disciplines of science venerating objectivity as the measure of all things? So do we really have to allow truth to be relative to account for cases like (1)?

This question has mesmerized scholars working on general issues of language for more than 15 years now. What started out as a rather small topic in specific areas of philosophy and linguistics has reached disciplines far beyond them. Faultless disagreements are being discussed in nearly every subfield of philosophy by now and they have become a major topic in syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. They have furthered the exchange between theoretically and experimentally oriented scholars and have brought philosophers, linguistics and psychologists to jointly work on a solution. Still, no consensus has been reached.

The question of whether we have to allow truth to be relative to account for faultless disagreements is also the central question of this book. I will argue that we do not. All we have to do is combine a conservative semantic claim with a novel pragmatic one. More specifically, I will defend what I will call the *superiority approach*. It holds that Hannah and Sarah do not only communicate something about their personal gustatory preferences. They also communicate that their respective standard of taste is superior. This way, I will argue, we can account for faultless disagreements without allowing truth to be relative in any interesting sense.

But why would one think that faultless disagreements call for relative truth in the first place? Consider once more exchange (1). Since there does not seem to be an objective fact of the matter as to whether licorice is tasty it seems at least initially reasonable to assume that the propositions expressed in (1) are more complex than they might seem at first sight. They are not simply that licorice is tasty and that licorice is not tasty, respectively, but rather that licorice is tasty and not tasty to specific subjects. But when we then try out concrete ways in which the propositions could be more complex we seem to face a dilemma. If we assume that the propositions are about Hannah and Sarah, respectively, we can account for the fact that both speakers are faultless: by holding that (1a) expresses that licorice is tasty to Hannah and that (1b) expresses that licorice is not tasty to Sarah, we would predict that what the speakers say is both objectively true. But we cannot account for the fact that they are disagreeing. After all, the propositions expressed are compatible. It can jointly be the case that licorice is tasty to Hannah and not tasty to Sarah. If we assume, in contrast, that each proposition expressed is about both Hannah and Sarah, we can account for the fact that they are disagreeing: by holding that (1a) expresses that licorice is tasty to Hannah and Sarah, and that (1b) expresses that licorice is not tasty to Hannah and Sarah, we would predict that they are contradicting each other. But we cannot account for the fact that they are faultless. After all, it is not the

case that both propositions are true (assuming, as we did, that Hannah but not Sarah likes licorice). The proposition expressed by (1b) might be true, but the proposition expressed by (1a) is definitely false.

Impressed by this dilemma, many scholars—philosophers and linguists alike—bit the bullet and adopted *relativism*. This view can be presented as consisting of two claims, one about the sentences themselves and one about the propositions expressed by the sentences: (i) The sentences 'Licorice is tasty' and 'Licorice is not tasty' are only true or false relative to a standard of taste. That is, relative to different standards of taste, both 'Licorice is tasty' and 'Licorice is not tasty' can have different truth values. This is so because (ii) the propositions semantically expressed by 'Licorice is tasty' and 'Licorice is not tasty' are only true or false relative to a standard of taste. That is, relative to different standards of taste, both the proposition semantically expressed by 'Licorice is tasty' and the proposition semantically expressed by 'Licorice is not tasty' can have different truth values. Given these two claims, relativists argue, they can account for faultless disagreements. The speakers are faultless because the propositions expressed in (1)—that licorice is tasty and that licorice is not tasty—are both true relative to Hannah's and Sarah's standard, respectively. And they are disagreeing with one another, because these two propositions are contradictory. From each perspective, the two propositions cannot be jointly true.

In spelling out their view, relativists made a substantial contribution to disentangling the vexing notion of relativism. For one thing, they distinguished a broad conception of relativism that had been promoted in various areas of philosophy long before the rise of faultless disagreements from a narrower or 'genuine' form of relativism, as they sometimes call it. The broad conception, they explained, only commits itself to the first of the two claims given above: that the truth value of sentences is relative and can vary with the standard of taste. This form of relativity, they noted, considered in itself, is quite harmless. It can easily be sustained while holding on to the view that the truth value of the propositions expressed is absolute. All that needs to be added is that some element of the sentences (say 'tasty') is somehow context-sensitive. It might be homonymous, polysemous, or indexical; all that is important is that it implies that different propositions can be expressed at different contexts of use. For another thing, relativists distinguished between different versions of the narrow conception of relativism based on which context exactly determines whose taste is relevant for the truth value of a given utterance. The more conservative approach takes the standard of taste to be delivered by the so-called *context of use*. The more radical approach takes the standard of taste to be delivered by a newly added *context of assessment*. So while the first view models the taste sensitivity of, for instance, 'Licorice is (not) tasty' in the same way in which temporalism and contingentism (as opposed to eternalism and necessitarianism) model the time and world sensitivity of, for instance, 'The Chancellor of Germany is a woman,' the second view treats it as a whole new phenomenon.

In their defense of relativism, relativists also made a substantial contribution in making relativism socially acceptable in analytic philosophy where it had been sneered since pretty much year one. Contrary to a common objection, they showed, relativism is not

self-refuting. And it does not imply that everybody is just always justified in taking themselves to have their own truth. Relativists actually showed that relativism in the narrow sense defined above is a well-behaved view that is compatible with the general strive for objectivity.[2]

Even so, relativism was not to everybody's taste. In fact, over the course of time, various alternative responses to the dilemma from faultless disagreement have been presented.

One strand in the debate tries to account for faultless disagreements conservatively. The main two contenders are what are sometimes called *contextualism* and *objectivism*. Contextualism accepts (i), but rejects (ii): the sentences 'Licorice is tasty' and 'Licorice is not tasty' are indeed only true or false relative to a standard of taste, they claim. But, in line with the suggestion above, this is not due to the alleged fact that the propositions semantically expressed are only relatively true or false; it stems from the fact that the sentences contain an indexical element so that the propositions semantically expressed contain something like a standard of taste themselves (given what I said above it will not come as a surprise that this position has gone by the name *relativism* as well in earlier debates). Objectivism, in contrast, rejects (i) and consequently also (ii): the sentences 'Licorice is tasty' and 'Licorice is not tasty,' they hold, are absolutely true or absolutely false.

Another strand in the debate agrees with the relativist that neither contextualism nor objectivism is correct, but holds that relativism cannot account for faultless disagreements either. The most prominent approach in this camp is presumably *expressivism*. It is different from all the views listed before in that it denies that 'Licorice is tasty' and 'Licorice is not tasty' express truth evaluable propositions to begin with. Rather, they are mere expressions of liking and not liking, just as 'Yummy!' and 'Yuck!' are.

Each of these theories has been spelled out in a vast varieties of ways. And they are not even the only theories on offer. The literature on semantic options is by now immense, and it seems that more is coming.

A completely different response came from people who did not even see why we should bother about the dilemma from faultless disagreements in the first place. It is anything but clear, they held, that faultless disagreements can really exist. Some of these people argued that the notions of disagreement and faultlessness are awfully ambiguous. Others complained that the cases allegedly presenting faultless disagreements where seriously underdetermined. Placed in more realistic settings the exchanges would quickly loose one of the two components: either one of the speakers turns out to be at fault, or we find that there is no proper disagreement anymore; at best, the speakers verbally disagree, i.e. they are talking past each other.

This collection of positions is of course worth taking seriously (see my chapter 1). But skeptics of the phenomenon of faultless disagreement should note in turn that the puzzle from exchanges like (1) is, to a fair degree, independent of the notions of disagreement and faultlessness. The peculiarity of exchanges such as (1) can be seen already

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[2]   See, e.g., MacFarlane (2014, ch. 2.1) and the literature cited therein.

by acknowledging that they combine features of two completely different types of exchanges. Consider first the following two cases:

(1.1)   (a)   Hannah: I am tired.
        (b)   Sarah: I am not tired.
(1.2)   (a)   Hannah: I feel sick.
        (b)   Sarah: I do not feel sick.

Compare them to the following two:

(1.3)   (a)   Hannah: Angela Merkel was born in 1954.
        (b)   Sarah: Angela Merkel was not born in 1954.
(1.4)   (a)   Hannah: Angela Merkel called Joachim Sauer exactly 300 times in the
                           year of 1998.
        (b)   Sarah: Angela Merkel did not call Joachim Sauer exactly 300 times in
                           the year of 1998.

In all four cases, Sarah uses a sentence that is the (internal) negation of the sentence Hannah used (just like she did in exchange (1)). But (1.1) and (1.2), on the one hand, and (1.3) and (1.4), on the other, are different from one another in at least two respects. For one thing, the most natural way to think of Hannah and Sarah in the first two exchanges is that they have formed their beliefs on the basis of subjective feelings. They introspectively realize that they are (not) tired and that they (don't) feel sick, respectively. The most natural way to think of Hannah and Sarah in (1.3) and (1.4), though, is that they have formed their beliefs on the basis of some external evidence. They might have read a book about Angela Merkel or they might have collected evidence themselves. But, most certainly, they have done more than introspection. For another thing, it seems that Hannah and Sarah in the first exchange do not think that their respective interlocutor is at fault. Sarah could have quite naturally said 'Oh really? Well, I am not tired,' 'That's interesting! I am not tired' or 'I know! But I am not tired' (*mutatis mutandis* for (1.2)). In (1.3) and (1.4), though, it seems that they do think that the respective other is at fault. Sarah could have quite naturally said something like 'No, she wasn't. She was not born in 1954' or 'Nuh uh, she was not born in 1954' (*mutatis mutandis* for (1.4)).

Exchange (1) seems to occupy a strange middle position. Hannah and Sarah seem to have formed their beliefs on the basis of subjective feelings, just like Hannah and Sarah did in (1.1) and (1.2). According to the most natural way to picture them they have tried licorice and have come to realize that they (don't) like it, respectively. But they also seem to think that their exchange partner is at fault, just like they do in (1.3) and (1.4). It would be utterly strange if Sarah responded 'Oh really? Well, licorice is not tasty,' 'That's interesting! Licorice is not tasty,' or 'I know! But licorice is not tasty.' It would be much more natural to say 'No, it isn't. Licorice is not tasty' or 'Nuh uh, licorice is not tasty.' How can this middle position be explained?

It cannot be comprehensively explained by pointing to the fact that there is no (easy) way to find out whether Hannah or Sarah is right. The sentences of the respective second

exchange (those of (1.2) and (1.4)) are also hard to ascertain. And the middle position of (1) is not completely due to the fact that Hannah and Sarah talk about matters of taste either. Many exchanges about taste are not at all like (1). Consider the following two cases:

(1.5) (a)   Hannah: I like licorice.
      (b)   Sarah: I do not like licorice.
(1.6) (a)   Hannah: Angela Merkel likes licorice.
      (b)   Sarah: Angela Merkel does not like licorice.

Even though they are about the taste of licorice, they do not show the characteristics of exchange (1). Exchange (1.5) seems to be like (1.1) and (1.2) in that, on the most natural construal, Hannah and Sarah have formed their beliefs on the basis of subjective feelings (more concretely: their gustatory experiences) and neither of them seems to take the other one to be at fault. Sarah could quite naturally say 'Oh really? Well, I don't like licorice,' 'That's interesting! I don't like licorice,' or 'I know! But I don't like licorice.' Exchange (1.6), in contrast, seems to be like (1.3) and (1.4). Hannah and Sarah have most likely formed their beliefs on the basis of some external evidence and they do take their respective interlocutor to be at fault. Sarah could very reasonably say 'No, she doesn't. Angela Merkel does not like licorice' or 'Nuh uh, Angela Merkel does not like licorice.'

So there seems to be something special about exchanges such as (1). To bring that out, one can call them 'faultless disagreements' as Kölbel does and many people with him (Kölbel, 2002, p. 97; Kölbel, 2003, passim). But one need not. In fact, other labels have been used in the debate. Wright (1992, p. 145) first called them 'disputes with cognitive shortcomings;' later he calls them 'disputes of inclination' (Wright, 2001, p. 60; Wright, 2006, p. 38) and 'blameless disagreements' (Wright, 2001, p. 60). Pearson calls them 'subjective disagreements' (Pearson, 2013, p. 104) and MacFarlane, who has reservations regarding the term 'faultless' (MacFarlane, 2014, 133ff.) just calls them 'disagreement in subjective discourse' (MacFarlane, 2007a, p. 18). Alternatively, one can simply refrain from using any label and describe what is so puzzling about them: 'on the one hand, they appear to express subjective judgments, but, on the other hand, they can be disputed, as if they expressed objective facts.' (A. Cohen, MS, p. 1)

Skeptics of the phenomenon of faultless disagreement should also note that the puzzle from exchanges like (1) is not just an invention of a narrow-minded group of contemporary analytically and formally oriented philosophers and linguists. In his 'On the Standard of Taste,' Hume already saw the tension between the two features that we intuitively (or commonsensically) ascribe to judgments as they are expressed in (1).[3] On the one hand, he acknowledges the subjective nature of matters of taste:

Among a thousand different opinions which different men may entertain of the same subject, there is one, and but one, that is just and true; and the only difficulty is to fix and ascertain it. On the contrary, a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. It only marks a certain conformity or relation

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[3]   See also his 'On Tragedy,' Hume (1757/1898b).

between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind; and if that conformity did not really exist, the sentiment could never possibly have being. Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. To seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter. According to the disposition of the organs, the same object may be both sweet and bitter; and the proverb has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes. It is very natural, and even quite necessary, to extend this axiom to mental, as well as bodily taste; and thus common sense, which is so often at variance with philosophy, especially with the sceptical kind, is found, in decision. (Hume, 1757/1898a, p. 35)

On the other hand, he grants that we often treat the judgments as being similar to objective or factual judgments. Immediately after the quoted passage, Hume writes:

But though this axiom, by passing into a proverb, seems to have attained the sanction of common sense; there is certainly a species of common sense which opposes it, at least serves to modify and restrain it. Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe or a pond as extensive as the ocean. Though there may be found persons, who give the preference to the former authors; no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous. The principle of the natural equality of tastes is then totally forgot, and while we admit it on some occasions, where the objects seem near an equality, it appears an extravagant paradox, or rather a palpable absurdity, where objects so disproportioned are compared together. (Hume, 1757/1898a, p. 35)

For Kant, the question of how to account for the peculiar characteristics of judgments of taste even became one of the central questions of aesthetics. He was not so much troubled with judgments of the sort expressed in (1)—matters of personal taste as they are these days often called, which Kant called *judgments of agreeableness*. These judgements he took to be indeed purely subjective. He was more concerned with properly aesthetic judgments about, most centrally, the beauty, for which he used the label *judgments of taste*. He took them to be subjectively grounded, as the following passage of his 'Critique of Judgement' shows:

If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not, we do not refer the representation of it to the object by means of the understanding with a view to cognition, but by means of the imagination (acting perhaps in conjunction with the understanding) we refer the representation to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgement of taste, therefore, is not a cognitive judgement, and so not logical, but is aesthetic—which means that it is one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective. Every reference of representations is capable of being objective, even that of sensations (in which case it signifies the real in an empirical representation). The one exception to this is the feeling of pleasure or displeasure. This denotes nothing in the object, but is a feeling which the subject has of itself and of the manner in which it is affected by the representation. (Kant, 1790/2007, §1)

But Kant also took them to claim universal validity:

It would [...] be ridiculous if anyone who plumed himself on his taste were to think of justifying himself by saying: This object (the building we see, the dress that person has on, the concert we hear, the poem submitted to our judgement) is beautiful for me. For if it merely pleases him, he must not call it beautiful. Many things may for him possess charm and agreeableness—no one cares about that; but when he declares something to be beautiful, he expects the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself, but for everyone, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. Thus he says the thing is beautiful; and it is not as if he counted on others agreeing in his judgement of liking owing to his having found them in such agreement on a number of occasions, but he demands this agreement of them. He blames them if they judge differently, and denies them taste, which he still requires of them as something they ought to have; and to this extent it is not open to us to say: Everyone has his own taste. This would be equivalent to saying that there is no such thing at all as taste, i.e. no aesthetic judgement capable of making a rightful claim upon the assent of everyone. (Kant, 1790/2007, §7)

It is thus fair to say that the peculiarity of exchanges similar to (1) have been acknowledged in philosophy early on. This is of course not to say that Hume and Kant would have been happy to call the exchanges in question 'faultless disagreements;' nor do I want say that Hume's and Kant's aesthetic theories amount to the same thing. Quite the opposite.[4] I merely want to stress that the phenomenon to be explained has been acknowledged long before the advent of modern day relativism.

It is also worth noting that faultless disagreements do not seem to be a quirk of aesthetics (broadly construed). Over the course of time, they have been identified in a vast number of quite varied discourse areas. One such area is certainly ethics. Many people think that there are faultless disagreements on what is good and what is bad and on what a particular person ought to do in a given situation. This conviction, too, has some pedigree in the history of philosophy, but it is certainly most prominent in contemporary ethics and metaethics.[5]

Note, as an aside, that while in more recent, language focused debates scholars have stressed the tension between the notion of faultlessness and the notion of a disagreement, in ethics and metaethics, faultlessness has sometimes been presented as an explanation for there being a disagreement.[6] A closer look reveals, however, that it is really the *persistence* of certain disagreements: the fact that in the moral domain, many disagreements are resistant to a solution, that might be explained by the faultlessness of both parties involved. How could one party convince the other one to give up its position if this other position were just equally right? The *existence* of a disagreement, or more concretely, the fact that both parties take the respective other party to be at fault, is certainly not explained by the faultlessness of both parties. Quite the contrary, why would one party even try to convince the other one to give up its position if the other position were equally right? Hare already made a similar point with his chauvinistic thought experiment about the English and the cannibals. Contemplating about what would be the case if both groups where both right in their different applications of the word 'good' because 'good' meant something different in the two languages, he writes:

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4   For the relationship between Hume and Kant on matters of taste, see, e.g., Kulenkampff (1990).
5   See the discussion of, e.g., Williams (1974-1975), Harman (1975), Mackie (1977), and Dreier (1990).
6   See, e.g., Gowans (2000), Tolhurst (1987), and Tersman (2006).

If this were so, then when the missionary said that people who collected no scalps were good (English), and the cannibals said that people who collected a lot of scalps were good (cannibal), they would not be disagreeing, because in English (at any rate missionary English), 'good' would mean among other things 'doing no murder', whereas in the cannibals' language 'good' would mean something quite different, among other things 'productive of maximum scalps'. (Hare, 1952, p. 149)

So given at least a natural seeming way to unravel the faultlessness of two (groups of) speakers—namely to assume the ambiguity of a given key term—faultlessness does not explain why they disagree.

Other discourse areas in which faultless disagreements have been identified are epistemology (e.g., what a given subject knows in a certain situation) and ontology (what exists), as well as certain kinds of talk about the non-actual ('displaced' sentences, as Charles F. Hockett would call them), like modal, conditional, and future directed talk (what might be the case, what would have been the case had something else been the case, and what will be the case). Even probability talk has been said to allow for faultless disagreements (what is likely to be the case).[7]

Note that, by listing these domains, I do not want to commit myself to the claim that faultless disagreements can indeed occur in all these domains. I do acknowledge them in some areas, but I'm skeptical towards their existence in others. Of course, such an intermediate position calls for an explanation—what separates the two kinds of areas from each other?—but I am not going to elaborate on that here. All I want to stress for now is that the topic itself is not specific to a certain philosophical discipline. Over the last 15 years, it has become a talking point in basically all philosophical fields.

Now one might acknowledge that, whatever its exact scope, the phenomenon of faultless disagreement is real, but wonder why one would take it to be of general interest. Didn't the debate of the last years show that, properly worked out, all the semantic theories outlined above are actually quite similar? So is it really that important whether a conservative semantics or, say, relativism is correct? Isn't this of relevance only for a highly specialized group of formal semanticists?

The discussion of the last years has certainly shown that many semantic theories can mimic aspects which competing theories have claimed to be their advantage. More specifically, it has been shown that relativism is not that outrageous. The way it is spelled out above it does not imply that we are justified in thinking that anything we want is true for us. In other words: the general fear of relativism is baseless. But assuming that this makes the investigation of faultless disagreements a topic of formal semanticists only would grossly underestimate its potential.

By looking at faultless disagreements *in abstracto* we might indeed primarily learn about the intricacies of semantic frameworks on the most general level. But investigating faultless disagreements in particular domains teaches us much more. We learn about the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of individual lexical expressions (such as 'is beautiful,' 'is good,' 'knows' or 'exists') as well as the functioning of whole classes of terms, like

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[7] For an overview of these other domains, see, e.g., the anthologies García-Carpintero (2008) and Hales (2011), and the monograph MacFarlane (2014). See also my chapter 1.