

On Losing Disagreements: Spencer's Attitudinal Relativism

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In 'Reversibility or Disagreement' (this journal), we posed a dilemma for invariantists about epistemic expressions—that is, for those who claim that expressions such as 'might' and 'probably' make a context-invariant contribution to the truth conditions of the utterances to which they belong. The crux of our dilemma is simple: invariantists, we argued, cannot make sense of a phenomenon that we dubbed *reversibility* without sacrificing the claims about *disagreement* to which they appeal in arguing for their position over the contextualist alternative. In 'Disagreement and Attitudinal Relativism' (this journal), Jack Spencer claims to have 'found a path between the horns of Ross and Schroeder's dilemma' (p. 33). He argues that by adopting a position that he calls 'attitudinal relativism,' the invariantist can account for reversibility 'and for the disagreements that go missing under contextualism' (p. 4). He writes:

Ross and Schroeder claim to 'cast doubt on the putative data about disagreement' that is often used to motivate invariantism. In my view, however, no doubt has been cast. The Argument from Lost Disagreement withstands the scrutiny to which Ross and Schroeder subject it (p. 33).

In this reply, we will argue that Spencer's attempt to avoid the two horns of our dilemma is unsuccessful. To this aim, we will begin with a review of the dilemma that Spencer aims to resolve. We will then explain how attitudinal relativism is meant to resolve it. And we will conclude by showing that this solution fails.

I The Problem Spencer Aims to Solve

Here we will summarize Spencer's presentation of the problem facing invariantism. While Spencer's characterization of this problem differs somewhat from our own, we will not press this point. Instead, we will accept Spencer's characterization for the sake of argument, and show that his account fails to solve the problem *as he understands it*, and hence that it fails on its own terms.

In order to explain the problem facing invariantism as Spencer construes it, let us begin by clarifying the phenomenon of *reversibility*, as well as Spencer's conception of *correct contrariness* which he regards as a generalization of reversibility. A sentence is *reversible* just in case a fully rational agent can sincerely assertively utter this sentence while believing that later, after acquiring additional evidence and revising her beliefs in the manner required by this evidence, she will sincerely assertively utter the negation of this sentence. It's easy to construct reversible sentences using indexical expressions. Thus, 'it is now Tuesday' is clearly reversible. What's more surprising is that epistemic expressions, such as 'might,' 'probably,' etc., likewise give rise to reversibility. For each of the epistemic expressions, we can construct at least one reversible sentence that contains this expression and no other context-sensitive expression. As an illustration involving 'might', consider the following case:

Old News: Ankita is the anchorwoman for the *Morning News Hour*. As of this morning, it is unknown whether Axeworthy is the murderer, and so Ankita utters *m*: 'Axeworthy might be, and might not be, the murderer.' She knows, however, that in the afternoon the DNA test will be completed and its results announced, establishing whether Axeworthy is the murderer. Ankita also knows that the anchorman for the *Evening News Hour* is very sloppy, and she expects that this evening he will utter *m*. And she predicts that when she hears this, she will exclaim: 'Nonsense! It is not the case that Axeworthy might be, and might not be, the murderer.'

According to Spencer, reversibility 'is an instance of a more general phenomenon, which we might call *correct contrariness*' (p. 7). 'What is important about *Old News*,' Spencer tells us, 'is not that Ankita sincerely utters a sentence and later sincerely utters its negation. What is important is the deeper fact: that Ankita *judges* both that it is correct to sincerely utter a sentence and that later it will be correct to sincerely utter its negation' (p. 8). Moreover, since, in the morning, Ankita judges that she will be correct when, in the evening, she assertively utters the negation of *m*, it seems that in the morning she does not disagree with her later assertion. Thus, Spencer concludes, 'in *Old News*, Ankita does not disagree with her later self' (p. 8). More generally, he concludes, 'cases of reversibility are not disagreements' (p. 30).

Thus, as Spencer understands the dialectic, in order to make sense of reversibility, the invariantist needs an account of disagreement that does not imply that cases of reversibility are cases of disagreement.

The challenge is to offer such an account of disagreement that does not sacrifice one of the main arguments used to motivate invariantism over contextualism, an argument that Spencer presents as follows:

One of the main arguments against contextualism is the Argument from Lost Disagreement. Take for example the contested sentence w : ‘Water might be an element.’ According to contextualism about ‘might’, utterances of w express different propositions in different contexts. When Thales, in c_1 , utters w , he affirms the proposition *that it is consistent with the evidence in c_1 that water is an element*. When Cavendish, upon discovering the composition of water in c_2 , utters $\neg w$, he denies the proposition *that it is consistent with the evidence in c_2 that water is an element*. Contextualism thus predicts that Thales and Cavendish do not disagree . . . By contrast, invariantism seems to predict that Thales and Cavendish do disagree: for if invariantism is true then Thales affirms the very proposition that Cavendish denies. So the fact that Thales and Cavendish seem to disagree tells against contextualism and in favor of invariantism. (p. 2)

In order to sustain this argument, the invariantist needs an account of disagreement that predicts that Cavendish disagrees with Thales. And yet, in order to make sense of reversibility, this account of disagreement must not predict that Ankita disagrees with her future self.

What we suggested in our paper was that the invariantist should adopt an *asymmetric* account of disagreement, according to which, in typical cases where a less-informed and a more-informed speaker utter the negations of one another’s epistemic sentences, the more informed speaker (such as Cavendish or evening-Ankita) disagrees with the less informed speaker (such as Thales or morning-Ankita), whereas the less-informed speaker does not disagree with the more informed speaker.¹ However, Spencer does not follow this suggestion. Instead, he maintains the standard view that disagreement is symmetric. Hence, what he seeks is an account on which there is disagreement between Thales and Cavendish (so as to retain the Argument from Lost Disagreement), but no disagreement between morning-Ankita and evening-Ankita (so as to make sense of reversibility). We will explain his account in the next section, and criticize it in the final two sections, where we will see that it is hopeless to try to distinguish Thales from Ankita.²

¹ See also Lennertz MS, who develops a dynamic account which yields exactly these predictions about asymmetric disagreement. Richard Dietz 2008 defends the weaker claim that it is possible for there to be asymmetries in *correct* disagreement. Dietz’s observations do not require cases of reversible sentences.

² In ‘Reversibility or Disagreement’, we were concerned only with epistemic expressions such as ‘might’ and ‘probably’—expressions used to indicate how things stand in relation to the evidence. By contrast, in Spencer’s response paper, he moves between discussing epistemic expressions and discussing predicates of personal taste such as ‘tasty’ and ‘fun’. We believe, however, that there are important differences between these classes of expressions. For one thing, given the manner in which we have defined reversibility (in terms of expecting to utter the negation of the sentence one presently utters as a result of acquiring additional evidence), it’s unclear that predicates of personal taste give rise to reversibility. Moreover, if we moved to a broader conception of reversibility on which sentences involving predicates of personal taste qualify as reversible, then it would no longer be clear that cases of reversibility are not cases in which one disagrees with one’s future self. Consider, for example, Spencer’s case in which Bill, a freshman in college, utters the sentence ‘Chugging beer is fun’ while correctly predicting that in thirty years, when his own son is a freshman in college, he will sincerely utter ‘Chugging beer isn’t fun’ (pp. 6-7). In this case, unlike in *Old News*, it’s far from clear that the younger self regards the later assertion as correct, nor is it clear that the younger self does not disagree with the older self. For these reasons, we continue to restrict our attention to epistemic expressions.

2 Spencer's Proposed Solution

According to Spencer's account of disagreement, two beliefs *disagree* just in case the correctness of one guarantees the incorrectness of the other (pp. 26-27). Now, on the standard view of belief, one believes a proposition *simpliciter*, and one's belief is correct just in case the proposition believed is true *simpliciter*. However, Spencer adopts a relativist view of both belief and truth. He maintains not only that a proposition can be *true* relative to some contexts and not others, but also that we can *believe* a proposition relative to some contexts and not others. Thus, he proposes a relativized conception of belief. According to Spencer, one *believes* a proposition p for a set of contexts S just in case:

- (i) One regards p as true in all the contexts in S .
- (ii) One occupies one of the contexts in S .

And this attitude toward p is *correct*, he tells us, just in case p is true in all the contexts for which one believes p .

When we combine Spencer's account of disagreement with his relativized account of belief and its correctness condition, we get the following result:

Relativized Disagreement Thesis: For any proposition p , if one agent A_1 believes p and another agent A_2 believes $\sim p$, then these beliefs will disagree just in case p 's being true in all the contexts for which A_1 believes p guarantees that p is true in some of the contexts for which A_2 believes $\sim p$.

Thus, on this view, there are two ways in which a pair of agents, A_1 and A_2 , can disagree in believing p and $\sim p$, respectively. First, the set of contexts for which A_1 believes p may *overlap* with the set of contexts for which A_2 believes $\sim p$. Alternatively, there may be a *necessary connection* between the truth values of p in the two sets of contexts, so that if p is true in all the contexts for which A_1 believes p , then it must also be true in some *distinct* contexts for which A_2 believes $\sim p$. Either way, the correctness of A_1 's belief will guarantee the incorrectness of A_2 's belief, and so it will follow from Spencer's account of disagreement that the beliefs of A_1 and A_2 disagree.

There is a crucial difference between Spencer's view of disagreement and standard relativist views of disagreement. Most relativists allow for the possibility of *faultless disagreement*, in the following sense.³ Consider a case in which, for each and every context, agents A_1 and A_2 both know whether p or $\sim p$ is true in this context. Hence, they don't disagree concerning whether p or $\sim p$ is true relative to any given context. It

³ See, particularly, Kölbel 2004 and Egan 2014, for relativist discussions of faultless disagreement. Kölbel maintains that such disagreements are faultless in a stronger sense than that we are employing, here.

happens, however, that A_1 occupies one of the contexts relative to which p is true, whereas A_2 occupies one of the contexts relative to which $\sim p$ is true. In such a case, most relativists would maintain the following:

- (i) Since p is true relative to A_1 's context, it would be correct for A_1 to believe p .
- (ii) Since $\sim p$ is true relative to A_2 's context, it would be correct for A_2 to believe $\sim p$.
- (iii) If A_1 and A_2 were to have these correct beliefs, then they would thereby disagree.

Hence, most relativists maintain that two people in different context can disagree even when all their beliefs are entirely correct.

But Spencer is committed to denying the possibility of faultless disagreement, in this sense. For, since the correctness of one belief can guarantee the incorrectness of another belief only if at least one of these beliefs is incorrect, it follows from Spencer's account of disagreement that two beliefs can disagree only if at least one of them is incorrect. Moreover, on Spencer's view, one's belief in a proposition can be incorrect only if one *believes it for*, and hence *regards it as true relative to*, at least one context in which it is false. And so it follows from Spencer's view that, when one person believes p and another person disbelieves p , they can disagree only if at least one of them is mistaken concerning the contexts relative to which p is true.

As we will see in the next section, this feature of Spencer's view allows him to make sense of reversibility, but it predictably prevents him from salvaging the Argument from Lost Disagreement.

3 Why This Proposal Fails

Spencer has no trouble explaining why we don't disagree with our future selves in reversibility cases. Consider, once again, *Old News*. Spencer maintains that when morning-Ankita utters m 'Axeworthy might be, and might not be, the murderer' and evening-Ankita utters $\sim m$, while there is a single proposition, p_m , that the former asserts and the latter denies, there is nonetheless no disagreement between them, since each one takes a *narrow* attitude toward the proposition believed. That is, morning-Ankita believes p_m only for a narrow set of contexts that does not include the context occupied by evening-Ankita, and evening-Ankita believes $\sim p_m$ only for a narrow set of contexts that does not include the context occupied by morning-Ankita. Since their attitudes are narrow in scope, they can both be correct, and so it follows from Spencer's account of disagreement that they do not disagree.⁴

⁴ Of course, on Spencer's view it is also possible for morning-Ankita and evening-Ankita to take *wide* attitudes, believing p_m and $\sim p_m$, respectively, with respect to a wider range of contexts, which will result in them disagreeing. And nothing in our initial description of the scenario tells us explicitly whether Ankita takes wide or narrow attitudes in the morning and the evening. But all that we claimed was to describe a possibly rational scenario. And so it is fair game for Spencer to reply that ours is a possibly

Unfortunately, however, the very features of Spencer’s view that allow him to make sense of reversibility prevent him from vindicating the Argument from Lost Disagreement. Spencer makes sense of reversibility by maintaining that morning-Ankita and evening-Ankita both have *narrow* attitudes toward the relevant propositions, and thereby fail to disagree. But in order to vindicate the Argument from Lost Disagreement, Spencer must maintain that Thales and Cavendish *do* disagree when Thales utters w (“water might be an element”) and Cavendish utters $\sim w$. Now, where p_w is the proposition expressed by utterances of w , it follows from Spencer’s view of disagreement that, in order for Thales and Cavendish to disagree in believing p_w and $\sim p_w$, respectively, at least one of them must have an incorrect belief. Hence, given Spencer’s account of the correctness conditions for belief, they will disagree only if at least one of the following conditions obtains:

- (i) Thales regards p_w as true relative to some context in which p_w is not true; or
- (ii) Cavendish regards $\sim p_w$ as true relative to some context in which $\sim p_w$ is not true.

But on any plausible relativist view, whether a *might*-proposition is true relative to a given context c will depend on facts about the epistemic situation in c . For simplicity, let’s suppose that p_w (*water might be an element*) is true in all and only those contexts in which it is not known that water is not an element. (Nothing turns on this assumption; a parallel argument could be given for any plausible relativist account of the truth conditions of p_w .) On this assumption, one can rationally regard p_w ($\sim p_w$) as true relative to a given context c only if one regards c as a context in which it is not known (known) that water is not an element. Consequently, assuming Thales and Cavendish are rational, (i) and (ii) can obtain only if the following obtain, respectively:

- (i’) There is some context, c , such that it is *known* in c that water is not an element, and yet Thales mistakenly regards this as not known in c .
- (ii’) There is some context, c , such that it is *not known* in c that water is not an element, and yet Cavendish mistakenly regards this as *known* in c .

Now let us adopt the further simplifying assumption that the contexts in which it is known that water is not an element are precisely those contexts in 1766 or later. (Once again, nothing turns on this simplifying assumption—any other stipulation concerning the contexts in which this is known would do just as well). It follows that (i’) and (ii’) can obtain only if the following obtain, respectively:

rational scenario because it is rational in the possible variation of the case on which Ankita’s attitudes are narrow. So this is a fair stipulation for him to make, to make sense of our case, even though it was not part of our description of the case.

- (i'') Thales mistakenly holds that it is *not known* that water is not an element in some context *in 1766 or later*.
- (ii'') Cavendish mistakenly holds that it is *known* that water is not an element in some context prior to 1766.

And so it follows from Spencer's view that Thales and Cavendish can disagree only if (i'') or (ii'') obtain. But if Thales is rational, then (i'') cannot obtain. For, for all Thales knows, water might not be an element, and this might be discovered by 1766. And so it would be irrational for Thales to believe that it will not be known that water is not an element in or after 1766. Similarly, if Cavendish is rational, then (ii'') cannot obtain. For it would be irrational for Cavendish to believe that it was known that water is not an element prior to the time when he made this discovery. But since neither (i'') or (ii'') can be true if Thales and Cavendish are rational, it follows that, so long as they are rational, there will be no disagreement between them.

Thus, Spencer's view has trouble predicting disagreement in the very case that he uses to illustrate the Argument from Lost Disagreement. For, as the case of Thales and Cavendish is most plausibly construed, neither party is irrational. And, on this construal, Spencer's view fails to predict any disagreement. Of course, if one or both parties had irrational beliefs and if, as a result, there were some context *c* such that Cavendish thinks it's known in *c* that water is not an element and Thales thinks otherwise, then Spencer's account would imply that they disagree. But in such a case, *every* view will imply that Thales and Cavendish disagree, since they straightforwardly disagree about what is known in context *c*. Hence, in order to predict that there is disagreement in this kind of case, we don't need to appeal to invariantism or to any other aspect of Spencer's view.⁵

So far we've been focusing on the case of Thales and Cavendish, since this is the case Spencer uses to illustrate the Argument from Lost Disagreement. But Spencer's view will have similar implications concerning *any* case that could figure in a disagreement-based argument for invariantism about epistemic expressions. For, in any such case, Spencer's view will imply that the two parties can disagree only if there is an incompatibility in their beliefs about which epistemic propositions are true *relative to particular contexts of evaluation*. And this, in turn, will involve an incompatibility in their beliefs about the knowledge or evidence that is available in particular contexts. But if two people disagree concerning what is known in this or that

⁵ In contrast to our discussion, Spencer casts his explanation of disagreement in terms of capturing what he calls the 'spanning premiss', according to which '[i]nvariantism together with the new disagreement thesis should allow for cross-context disagreements that span any two contexts' (p. 12). We have not disputed that Spencer's account of disagreement captures this result. Instead, what we have shown is that this result fails to vindicate the lost disagreements over which the Argument from Lost Disagreement turns. This is because his account can only allow for cross-contextual disagreement in cases of irrationality or misleading evidence, but the cases of cross-contextual disagreement that drive the Argument from Lost Disagreement need not involve such features.

context, then they will have a disagreement of a perfectly ordinary kind, and so no view will have any difficulty accounting for the disagreement. Indeed, this should be no surprise, because on Spencer's account, disagreement about relatively-true propositions reduces to disagreement about absolute propositions about the truth-values of relatively-true propositions with respect to different contexts. So it is a trivial corollary of this structural feature of his account that his account cannot yield disagreement in any cases in which his opponent cannot. Thus, Spencer's view fails to predict any disagreements that go missing on rival views, and so it fails to vindicate the Argument from Lost Disagreement.

4 Conclusion

We should not be at all surprised that Spencer failed to do what he set out to do. For he set out to arrive at an account of disagreement that would predict that there is *no* disagreement in reversibility cases (e.g., between morning-Ankita and evening-Ankita), but that there *is* disagreement in the cases that figure in the Argument from Lost Disagreement (e.g., between Thales and Cavendish). And so what he needs to do, is to draw a principled distinction between these two cases.

But unfortunately for the task of drawing such a distinction, the relationship between morning- and evening-Ankita is exactly analogous to the relationship between Thales and Cavendish. Indeed, this follows directly from the point of using epistemic language in the first place. For in addition to the fact that Thales and Cavendish's case involves two people, while Ankita's involves only one, which Spencer has agreed with us makes no material difference, there are only two relevant differences between Thales' case, as we have described it, and Ankita's. First, whereas Thales asserts only a sentence of the form, 'it might be that p ', Ankita asserts a sentence of the form, 'it might be that p and it might be that $\sim p$ '. And second, Thales doesn't know about Cavendish, but morning-Ankita does know about evening-Ankita. However, neither of these differences between the cases can ground a difference in how we treat disagreement in the two cases.

The reason that the first difference cannot make a difference is that in general, we say 'it might be that p ' not just when we lack evidence that $\sim p$, but when we also lack evidence that p . This is for straightforwardly Gricean pragmatic reasons – for if we know that p , saying 'it might be that p ' is going out of our way to be more verbose, in order to be less informative than we could be in the conversation, and hence is conversationally uncooperative. So the *vast majority* of normal, conversationally cooperative uses of sentences like 'it might be that p ' are cases in which 'it might be that p and it might be that $\sim p$ ' are both sincerely assertible. So Thales could just as well have said, 'water might be, and might not be, an element', and nothing about the story would have been relevantly different, except that it would have been unnecessarily

verbose. Similarly, Cavendish could just as well have said, ‘it is not the case that water might be, and might not be, and element’. And the same goes for every other case used in Arguments from Lost Disagreement.

The reason that the second difference cannot make a difference is that when we use epistemic language from a state of uncertainty, we are not predicting that no one will ever have knowledge or evidence of the kind that we are missing. If it did, we would be licensed in using epistemic language much more seldom than we in fact are. Since our uses of ‘it might be that p and it might be that $\sim p$ ’ don’t require that no one else has, or every will, come to have knowledge or evidence whether p , coming to learn that someone else does, in fact, have knowledge or evidence whether p will not, in general, undermine our belief that it might be that p and it might be that $\sim p$ – so long as we don’t also learn which way her evidence leans. And so if Thales were to learn that someday someone named ‘Cavendish’ will acquire conclusive evidence as to whether water is an element, that would not change anything relevant about the usefulness of the case for the Argument from Lost Disagreement. Again, the same goes for any other case used in Arguments from Lost Disagreement.

We conclude that it’s hardly surprising that a theory of disagreement that avoids predicting disagreement in Ankita’s case would also fail to predict disagreement in Thales’ case. That is why our problem poses a dilemma to invariantists. We should not, therefore, be surprised that Spencer, like other invariantists, loses the disagreement.

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