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Faultless or Disagreement

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Among the various motivations that may lead to the idea that truth is relative in some non-conventional sense, one is that the idea helps explain how there can be "faultless disagreements", that is, situations in which a person A judges that *p*, a person B judges that not-*p*, but neither A nor B is at fault. The line of argument goes as follows. It seems that there are faultless disagreements. For example, A and B may disagree on culinary matters without either A or B being at fault. But standard semantics has no room for such a case, so there is something wrong with standard semantics. The best way to amend it is to add a new parameter that is relevant to the truth or falsity of what A and B judge, presumably, something related to personal taste.[1] The aim of what follows is to show that this line of argument is flawed. It is true that standard semantics has no room for faultless disagreements. But there is nothing wrong with this, for it should not be assumed that such disagreements exist.

1. The claim that there are faultless disagreements is at odds with a schema that seems correct at first sight:

F If *p* and one judges that not-*p*, then one is at fault.

F seems correct because all it says is that if things are a certain way, it is wrong to judge that they are not that way. In other words, if it is true that *p* then it is not true that not-*p*, hence judging that not-*p* is judging something not true. The clash between F and the claim that there are faultless disagreements is shown by the following proof:

1	A judges that *p* and B judges that not-*p*	Assumption
2	Neither A nor B is at fault	Assumption
3	*p*	Assumption
4	B is at fault	1, 3 F
5	Not-*p*	2, 3, 4 RAA

[1] The expression 'faultless disagreement' is used by Max Kölbel. The line of argument appears in Kölbel (2003), Kölbel (2008) and Lasersohn (2005).

6	A is at fault	1, 5 F
7	Not-2	2, 2, 6 RAA

1 advances the hypothesis that A and B disagree. 2 adds to that hypothesis that the disagreement is faultless. 3 is an adjunctive assumption that leads from 1 to 4 with the help of F. 5 is derived from 2, 3 and 4 by *reductio ad absurdum*, so 3 is discharged and the following lines do not depend on it. 6 is warranted by F given the apparently innocuous condition that if one judges that *p* then one judges that not-not-*p*. For on that condition F entails that if not-*p* and one judges that *p*, then one is at fault. 7 is obtained again by *reductio ad absurdum* and depends solely on 1, given that 2 is discharged. From 1–7 it turns out that if A and B disagree then it is not the case that neither A nor B is at fault, which is classically equivalent to the conclusion that if A and B disagree then either A or B is at fault.[2]

The proof set out entails the negation of the claim that there are faultless disagreements, so either there is something wrong with it, or the claim is not true. An argumentative move in favour of the first alternative goes as follows. If one accepts the proof, one must have something to say about the disputes that qualify as good candidates for being faultless disagreements, that is, the disputes where two persons A and B seem to contradict each other—in that, say, A assertively utters a sentence and B assertively utters its negation—yet the topic is not one of those for which it is clearly inappropriate to suppose that neither A nor B is at fault. Two options are available, but neither of them is attractive. The first is to adopt a "realist" view according to which such disputes are really disagreements, but they are only apparently faultless. That is, either A or B is at fault, even if there may be no way of settling the issue and find out where the mistake is. Realism is unattractive in that it does not account for the fact that we are inclined to regard certain disputes as faultless, hence it is unable to explain the difference between such disputes and those we are not inclined to regard as faultless. The second option is to adopt a form of "indexical relativism" according to which the candidate disputes are really faultless, but they are only apparently disagreements. In this case the view is that the judgments conveyed by A and B are, or are equivalent to, those expressed by sentences involving reference to A and B themselves. For example, if A utters '*x* is tasty' and B utters '*x* is not tasty', the judgments they convey are, or are equivalent to, those expressed by '*x* is tasty for me' and '*x* is not tasty for me', so A and B do not really contradict each other. Indexical relativism is unattractive in that it doesn't account for the fact that we are inclined to regard at least some candidate disputes as disagreements, hence it is unable to explain the difference between such disputes and the cases in which

[2] Similar derivations are considered in Wright (2001: 56), Kölbel (2002: 24–5), and Kölbel (2003: § 2).

two parties express mere preferences by using overtly indexical sentences.[3] This reasoning seems to draw its appeal from two unquestionable facts. The first, invoked against realism, is that there are disputes about culinary matters or similar topics that we are inclined to regard as faultless. An example may illustrate. Two wine connoisseurs buy a bottle of Barolo and a bottle of Barbaresco for €100 each. After tasting both, one of them says "This is better", and the other replies "No, that is better". Acknowledging the divergence, each of them feels the need to reassert the favoured view in front of the other. But a couple of attempts unaccompanied by appreciable progress lead them quickly to drop the subject and start talking about something else. It is no accident that they do not embark on a thorough discussion on the virtues of Barolo and Barbaresco. Usually, when one argues for a view one thinks that there are reasons to accept the view, and hence that by stating those reasons one may be able to convince another person that initially does not accept it. There may be something about which that person is mistaken or ignorant, or there may be a type of experience of which that person is devoid. But in our case neither of the two disputants thinks that way.

The second fact, invoked against indexical relativism, is that there are disputes about culinary matters or similar topics that we are inclined to regard as disagreements. An example of such dispute may be the following. While the two connoisseurs are still talking, a friend of them shows up with some wine in a box that he bought for €0.99 at a discount shop. They offer him a glass of Barolo, and he offers his wine in return. After tasting the Barolo and learning that the bottle cost €100, he says "This is no better than my own", and adds a disapproving look to comment on the price. Then one of the two connoisseurs retorts "Yes, it is!", and all of them start discussing wine. Although the friend seems not to give in easily, the two connoisseurs keep arguing with him, because they think there are reasons to believe that Barolo is better. It is their deep conviction that anyone sufficiently exposed to the type of experience they had would agree with them.

Examples like the first make it plausible to claim that there are faultless disputes about culinary matters or similar topics, while examples like the second make it plausible to claim that there are disagreements about such topics. However, it is essential to recognize that acceptance of these two claims does *not* amount to acceptance of the claim that there are faultless disagreements. If it did, the reasoning would be blatantly circular. Clearly, one is bound to accept the two claims if one accepts the claim that there are faultless disagreements. If there is at least one faultless disagreement about culinary matters or similar topics, then there is at least one dispute about such topics that is faultless and at least one dispute about such topics that is a disagreement. But the converse does not hold. Assuming that there are disputes about culinary matters or similar topics that are faultless and disputes about such topics that are disagreements, it does not follow

[3] This line of argument emerges from Wright (2001: § 1), and Kölbel (2003: §§ 3–4).

that there are faultless disagreements about such topics. For nothing guarantees that the first two sets of disputes have some member in common.

2. The upshot of the argument outlined is that one should think it over before accepting the proof. But perhaps one should think it over before accepting the argument. Undoubtedly, realism and indexical relativism as they have been depicted are quite unattractive options. However, one question is whether each of these two options is tenable, another question is whether the conclusion of the proof is true. The distinction is crucial, because the considerations that may be advanced against realism and indexical relativism do not by themselves undermine the proof.

It is clear how the two facts invoked give evidence against the two views. Realism is taken to entail that all the disputes that qualify as good candidates for being faultless disagreements are disagreements. Since we are inclined to say that some disputes of that kind are faultless, the realist is left with the problem that some disagreements seem faultless. In the same way, indexical relativism is taken to entail that all the disputes that qualify as good candidates for being faultless disagreements are faultless. Since we are inclined to say that some disputes of that kind are disagreements, the indexical relativist is left with the problem that some faultless disputes seem disagreements. That is, in one case the problem arises because the disputes the first inclination is about are assumed to be *disagreements*, while in the other it arises because the disputes the second inclination is about are assumed to be *faultless*.

What the argument tends to conceal, however, is that although each of these two assumptions is required by the respective view, neither of them is required by the conclusion of the proof. All that the proof entails is that, given any dispute, either it is not faultless or it is not a disagreement. Take a dispute where the first inclination is strong, such as that between the two connoisseurs. In this case it is plausible that the first disjunct does not hold, so the consequence we get is that the second disjunct must hold. But this doesn't seem to be a problem, unless it is assumed that any dispute of the kind considered is a disagreement. The same goes for a dispute where the second inclination is strong, such as that between the two connoisseurs and the friend. In this case it is plausible that the second disjunct does not hold, hence we get that the first must hold. Again, the consequence seems to pose no problem without the assumption that any dispute of the kind considered is faultless. Is there some other piece of evidence, besides the two unquestionable facts considered, that may be invoked to question the proof? It seems not. As far as evidence is concerned, the proof stands. Of course, one apt to doubt the proof will probably regard the claim that there are faultless disagreements as "intuitive" on its own. The point, however, is that it is far from obvious that the claim is more intuitive than F or than the logic employed to derive Ⅎ. Therefore, insisting on it certainly would not suffice to undermine the proof.

Actually, it is not even obvious that the claim is intuitive *at all*. It is hard to find a clear example of a dispute that appears to be faultless and at the same time appears to be a disagreement. For any case that we are able to describe with sufficient accuracy, our inclinations seem to push us one way or the other. Thus in the case of the two connoisseurs we have no strong inclination to think that there is genuine disagreement. A natural thing to say about this case is that the divergence boils down to the fact that one of them prefers Barolo while the other prefers Barbaresco. Similarly, in the case of the two connoisseurs and the friend we have no strong inclination to think that the dispute is faultless. It is plausible that the connoisseurs are right and the friend is wrong. After all—we are tempted to say—expensive Barolo *is* better than boxed cheap wine.

3. Unlike what some may have thought, the thesis that no disagreement is faultless leaves room for a simple and straightforward account of the two unquestionable facts considered. All that is needed to make sense of those facts is to acknowledge *another* fact, which is so evident that one might wonder how it can go unnoticed. The fact is that there is an underlying ambivalence in our ordinary way of talking. Generally, when we express evaluative judgments on culinary matters or similar topics we assertively utter sentences of the form '*x* is P'. But there are different things we may want to say with such sentences. Sometimes we utter '*x* is P' to express a personal inclination towards *x*, that is, we mean that *x* is able to produce certain effects on us that characterize it as P for us. Call it *subjective* use of '*x* is P'. For example, in the case of the two connoisseurs 'This is better' and 'That is better' are intended to say nothing more than each of them would drink the referred wine if he had to choose. Neither of them is likely to oppose a paraphrase of the sentence uttered such as 'I prefer it' or 'I like it better'. At other times, instead, we utter '*x* is P' meaning that *x* is able to produce certain effects independently of our personal inclinations toward *x*. That is, we take *x* to be P for the average person, or for a normal person, or for any person under ideal conditions. Call it *objective* use of '*x* is P'. For example, in the case of the two connoisseurs and the friend, one of the two connoisseurs utters 'Yes, it is!', meaning that Barolo is better independently of his inclinations towards it. Presumably, he is not willing to rephrase what he utters as 'I prefer it' or 'I like it better'.[4]

Given that '*x* is P' may convey different kinds of judgment, the same goes for '*x* is not P'. Hence there are different kinds of dispute that two persons A and B may have if A utters '*x* is P' and B utters '*x* is not P', depending on what they actually mean. One kind of dispute is that in which A and B use '*x* is P' and '*x* is not P' subjectively, that is, A means that *x* is P for A, and B means that *x* is not P for B. In this case the dispute is faultless, but it is not a disagreement.

[4] As Isidora Stojanovic nicely puts it, there are cases in which the two parties are likely to move from Yes/No dialogue to Ok/Ok dialogue, and cases in which they aren't. See Stojanovic (2007), § 2.

Another kind of dispute is that in which A and B use '*x* is P' and '*x* is not P' objectively, that is, A means that *x* is P independently of A's inclinations towards *x*, and B means that *x* is not P in the same sense. In this case the dispute is a disagreement, but it is not faultless. Obviously, there are also disputes in which A and B differ in the kind of judgment conveyed. But any such dispute involves a misunderstanding, so it is likely to turn into a dispute of one of the other two kinds if A and B become clear about their respective intentions.

This shows how the two unquestionable facts can coexist. The first, namely, that there are disputes about culinary matters or similar topics that seem faultless, is easily explained by saying that those disputes *are* faultless, that is, they are of the first kind. The same goes for two related facts. One is that it is natural to distinguish between faultless disputes and disputes that are not faultless.[5] This is explained by saying that there are both disputes of the first kind and disputes of the second kind. The other is that it is natural to distinguish between topics on which faultless disputes can arise, such as culinary matters, and topics on which they cannot arise, such as mathematics.[6] This is explained by saying that there are topics on which ordinary discourse is ambivalent in the way described, and topics on which it is not. Normally, when we talk about mathematics we take any assertive utterance of a sentence of the form '*x* is P' to convey that *x* has the property of being P independently of the inclinations of the speaker.

The explanation of the second fact is analogous. The reason why some disputes about culinary matters or similar topics seem to be disagreements is that they *are* disagreements, that is, they are of the second kind. A related fact is that in some cases we talk about such topics assuming that there is a difference between using a sentence of the form '*x* is P' and using an overtly indexical sentence, such as 'I like *x*'.[7] This is explained by saying that in some cases '*x* is P' does not merely express a personal inclination towards *x*.

To say that any dispute belongs to one of the two categories indicated is not the same thing as to say that, for any case in which a person assertively utters '*x* is P' and another person assertively utters '*x* is not P', it is clear what kind of dispute they are having. In many cases it is *not* clear what kind of judgment one conveys by uttering such a sentence, because it is not clear what one has in mind. This may be due to the fact that one has in mind something that is not immediately manifest at the moment of the utterance, but that would come to the surface if the discussion were to progress. Or it may happen that one doesn't even have in mind something definite at a given stage, although one could end up by endorsing a clear-cut position at a later stage. A consequence of this unclarity is that in many cases we have no strong inclination to say that the dispute belongs to a given category between the two, hence we have no strong

[5] Wright (2001: 48), Kölbel (2003: 53). [6] Kölbel (2003: 58).
[7] Wright (2001: 51–2), Kölbel (2002: 38–40), Kölbel (2003: 64).

inclination to deny that it belongs to the other. This may foster the illusion that there are intuitive faultless disagreements.

4. The line of argument sketched at the beginning of the paper rests on the claim that there are faultless disagreements. For according to that line of argument, the problem with standard semantics is that it is unable to account for such disagreements. What has been said so far entails that there is no reason to accept the claim, hence that there is no reason to regard the indicted inability as a problem. However, this leaves open the question of how ordinary discourse on culinary matters or similar topics can be accounted for in compliance with the distinction between disputes of the first kind and disputes of the second kind. Therefore, it might still be suspected that standard semantics is in trouble. This last section is intended to dissipate that suspicion. The ambivalence in our use of sentences of the form '*x* is P' can plausibly be explained in accordance with standard semantics, so the same goes for the distinction between disputes of the first kind and disputes of the second kind.

There are basically two ways of explaining the ambivalence in our use of sentences of the form '*x* is P'. One is to appeal to *pragmatic* considerations such as the following. Given the linguistic meaning of '*x* is P', what a speaker 'says' by uttering it is always that *x* has the property of being P. Semantically, the property of being P is just like any other property. There is no significant difference between '*x* is P' and, say, '*x* is white'. However, not every utterance of '*x* is P' is intended to 'communicate' that *x* has the property of being P. There are utterances of '*x* is P' that convey something different, that is, something that could be said by uttering an indexical sentence such as 'I like *x*'. When that happens, the use of '*x* is P' is subjective. Otherwise, it is objective. According to this explanation, what matters to identify a dispute between A and B is what they communicate. Thus a dispute of the first kind is faultless, in that both A and B communicate something true. But it is not a disagreement, in that there is no contradiction in what they communicate. Similarly, a dispute of the second kind is a disagreement, in that A and B communicate what they say. But it is not faultless, in that they can't both say something true.

The other way is to couch the difference between subjective and objective use of '*x* is P' *semantically*, that is, as a difference in the interpretation of '*x* is P'. According to this explanation, a dispute of the first kind is one in which the sentences uttered are interpreted "subjectively", hence in different ways. By contrast, a dispute of the second kind is one in which they are interpreted "objectively", hence in the same way. That is, in the first case A assertively utters '*x* is P', B assertively utters '*x* is not P', but their interpretations α and β of '*x* is P' differ in such a way that the sentence is true relative to α and false relative to β. In this case neither A nor B is at fault, in that '*x* is P' is true relative to α and '*x* is not P' is true relative to β. But there is no disagreement between A and B, because α and β differ. By contrast, in the second case A assertively utters '*x* is P', B assertively utters 'x is not P', and there is an interpretation α of 'x is P' that A and B share. In this case A and B disagree, in that for A 'x is P' is true relative to α while for B it is false relative to α. But either A or B is at fault, given that 'x is P' can't be both true and false relative to α.

Neither of these two ways of explaining the ambivalence in our use of sentences of the form 'x is P' seems to cause trouble to standard semantics. In the first case the explanation is trivially compatible with standard semantics, because it is compatible with any account of the linguistic meaning of the sentences in question that takes their surface grammar at face value. Semantics doesn't really matter in this case, as the weight of the explanation is located outside its domain.

In the second case the explanation seems compatible with standard semantics, because the difference of interpretation can easily be described in terms of standard notions. One option is to adopt the notion of *index* to represent the context in which a sentence is uttered. A context is a concrete entity that includes innumerable features, such as a time, a place, a possible world, a conversational situation, and so on. An index is a collection of features of various sorts that may be "extracted" from the context. The notion of index can be combined with the assumption that the logical form of a sentence may not coincide with its surface grammar. On that assumption, a logical form has a number of open positions occupied by elements whose value can vary from context to context. These are either overt context-dependent expressions, such as indexicals, pronouns and demonstratives, or covert variables. Accordingly, an index can be defined as a number of values for those elements. A difference of interpretation can thus be described as a difference of index. That is, if the logical form of 'x is P' is something like 'x is P(y)', where y is a covert variable that takes persons or groups of persons as values, a subjective interpretation of 'x is P' can be defined as one in which the value of y is the speaker, while an objective interpretation of 'x is P' can be defined as one in which the value of y is a privileged group of persons or an ideal person.[8]

Another option is to adopt the notion of *point of evaluation*. Like the index, the point of evaluation is a collection of contextual features. But these are not necessarily features that go together as part of the same context. For example, a point of evaluation may include a time that is not that of the utterance, or a possible world that is not the actual world. If the notion of point of evaluation is adopted to explain the ambivalence in our use of sentences of the form 'x is P', a difference of interpretation can be described as a difference in the point at which the sentences in question are evaluated. In this case the thought is that a point of evaluation provides something like an evaluative background on which an object x may "count" as being P.[9]

[8] The notion of index is outlined in Kaplan (1989) and Lewis (1998).

[9] Predelli (2005) suggests that this is the role to be assigned to the point of evaluation in order to account for the context-sensitivity of sentences such as 'The leaves are green'.

One thing must be clear about this second option. To say that a difference of interpretation may lie in a difference of point of evaluation is to say that a difference of interpretation may not involve a difference of index. If an index gives us a "content" expressed by a sentence in a context, this means that different interpretations of the sentence are compatible with the same content. A faultless dispute can thus be described as one in which two parties do not really contradict each other by assertively uttering '*x* is P' and '*x* is not P', even though the two sentences express, as it were, contradictory contents. This is *not* what a relativist about truth should expect. Sometimes relativism is framed as a treatment of faultless disputes according to which the divergence between the two parties is located at the level of point of evaluation rather than at the level of index. The alleged advantage of such treatment over more conventional forms of indexicalism is that it preserves the apparent contradictoriness of contents.[10] But the explanatory choice of the point of evaluation is not in itself relativist. To get relativism, it has to be assumed in addition that a difference of point of evaluation does not amount to a difference of interpretation. Or else, a faultless dispute turns out to be one in which the sentences uttered are absolutely true or false on different interpretations.[11]

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[10] Kölbel (2003: § 7), Lasersohn (2005: §§ 2–4).

[11] García-Carpintero provides some elucidations about the notion of what is said that make this point vivid. Note that here the relativist has nothing to gain from the analogy with the case of 'The leaves are green'. For in that case the point of evaluation is taken to account for what appears to be a difference of interpretation.