REJECTION, DENIAL AND THE DEMOCRATIC PRIMARIES

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Starting from the case of insurance claims, I investigate the dynamics of acceptance, rejection and denial. I show that disagreement can be more varied than one might think. I illustrate this by looking at the Warren/Sanders controversy in the 2020 democratic primaries and at religious agnosticism.

When an insured party incurs an expense, they may submit a claim for reimbursement. The insurance company then reacts. They may accept the claim, reject it, or deny it.

It's clear enough what happens when the insurance company accepts the claim: the insured party receives the reimbursement requested. But what's the difference between a rejected claim and a denied one? When the insurance company denies a claim, this means that they will not reimburse the medical expense. By contrast, when the insurance company rejects a claim, this does not mean that they will not reimburse the medical expense – it only means that they do not accept the claim, perhaps because it has not been filed properly or certain information is missing. Something is wrong with the claim. The crucial difference is that while the insured party may resubmit a previously rejected claim, which might then be accepted, this is not possible for a denied claim.

Despite this initial excursus, this article is not about medical billing, or the philosophy of medicine for that matter. Rather, this article is about the dynamics of

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acceptance, rejection and denial, so beautifully exemplified in our example. (This doesn't make insurance practices any more pleasant, of course.) We are interested in how these dynamics play out in dialogue as well non-verbal exchanges. So let's start from a recent example.

We are in early January 2020. The setting is the democratic presidential primaries. The day before the first democratic primary debate of the year, CNN publishes a report alleging that in 2018, during a meeting in which Elizabeth Warren communicated to Bernie Sanders her intention to run for president, Sanders told Warren that a woman could not win in 2020. Shortly thereafter, Kristen Orthman, Communications Director for Warren's campaign, releases a statement on Twitter from Warren saying that during the meeting the topic came up of what would happen if the democrats nominated a female candidate: Warren 'thought a woman could win' while Sanders 'disagreed'. Sanders, for his part, also releases a statement, this time to CNN. In the first part of the statement, Sanders vehemently *denies* having said that a woman could not win the presidential election:

> It is ludicrous to believe that at the same meeting where Elizabeth Warren told me she was going to run for president, I would tell her that a woman couldn't win. It's sad that, three weeks before the Iowa caucus and a year after that private conversation, staff who weren't in the room are lying about what happened.

In denying that he said that a woman could not win, Sanders is saying that he did not say that a woman could not win. He is saying that the allegations of the CNN report are *false*. Just as in the insurance example, Sanders is indicating that he will not accept the claim that he said that a woman could not win.

Political commentators were quick to conclude that 'somebody's not telling the truth', as MSNBC's Mika

Brzezinski put it. (According to Brzezinski, it was Elizabeth Warren who wasn't telling the truth, but opinion was divided.) However, attention to the dynamics of acceptance, rejection and denial suggests a different possibility. Let us consider the second part of Sanders's statement to CNN:

> What I did say that night was that Donald Trump is a sexist, a racist and a liar who would weaponize whatever he could. Do I believe a woman can win in 2020? Of course! After all, Hillary Clinton beat Donald Trump by 3 million votes in 2016.

Sanders is here doing something which happens extremely frequently in cases of disagreement about the truth of a certain claim. Having denied the claim – having said that the claim is false – we make a counter-claim. In the insurance case, you can imagine the insurance company saying that although they deny the claim, they will accept a different one, perhaps for a lower amount. In this particular case, Sanders is saying that while he didn't say that a woman could not win, he did say that Trump is a sexist and would use whatever means he could to win. Now, is this incompatible with the truth of what Warren said?

Recall that Warren's recollection of what happened is that Sanders *thought* that a woman could not win. Given the context – Warren informing Sanders of her intention to run as a president – it would have been natural for Warren to infer that, by saying that Trump is a sexist who would weaponize whatever he could, Sanders was communicating that a woman could not win. As Warren pointed out, she and Sanders disagreed. But note that, again taking both of them at their word, it is implausible to think that they disagreed about the letter of what Sanders said: surely Warren would agree with Sanders that Trump is a sexist and a liar who would use the gender or ethnicity of his opponents to win. Instead, the disagreement seems to concern what Warren took Sanders to be implying – or implicating, using the terminology of philosopher Paul

Grice – namely that a woman could not win (Grice 1975). Because she took Sanders to be implying this, Warren *rejected* his claim even though she herself probably thought his claim to be literally true. As in the insurance case, in rejecting a claim we are not indicating that we will not accept it in the future, once the defects associated with the claim are removed. In this particular case, suppose that Sanders were to reiterate his claim that Trump is a sexist who would weaponize whatever he can, but stressed that he doesn't take this to imply that a woman could not win – perhaps saying that he does believe that a woman could win (as he indeed did in his statement to the CNN). Then there would be no reason for Warren not to accept his claim.

Thus, one may reject a claim because one thinks that the claim is false – one denies the claim. But one may reject the claim for other reasons. The Sanders/Warren case brings this into sharp relief: assuming both Sanders and Warren were telling the truth, what Warren did was to reject Sanders' claim because of its implications (or implicatures, again using Grice's terminology).

There are other reasons different from falsity for rejecting a claim. A prominent one is when one rejects a claim because it is not supported by the evidence.[1] A classic case of this sort concerns debate about the existence of God. Imagine the religious person saying that there is a God. The atheist will want to deny the claim: they think it's false that there is a God. The case of the agnostic, however, is different. The agnostic typically thinks that there isn't enough evidence for the existence of God and therefore rejects the claim that there is a God. However, the agnostic does not want to deny that there is a God, since they think that there isn't enough evidence against the existence of God either. Again, we have a clear analogy with the insurance case: the insurance company may reject a claim because the documentation provided is not sufficient for the claim to be accepted. Instead of denying the claim, the insurance company may ask for further evidence that the expense has been incurred.

The foregoing observations shed light on the various forms that disagreement can take. On a naïve picture, disagreement can only arise when one party thinks that a certain claim is true while the other party thinks that the claim is not true. However, paying close attention to the dynamics of making a claim – what the philosophers call assertion – and rejection shows that this picture is too simple. There can indeed be disagreement of the kind adumbrated, but there often occur disagreements of a different kind: one may disagree not because one thinks that what the other party said is false, but because one thinks that it is inappropriate in some other way, such as having undesirable implications or not being adequately supported by evidence.[2]

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Notes

[1] For more cases, see Incurvati and Schlöder (2017).

[2] This work has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 758540) within the project *From the Expression of Disagreement to New Foundations for Expressivist Semantics*.

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