



# Having a disagreement: expression, persuasion and demand

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## Abstract

It is common to distinguish between disagreement in the state sense (being in disagreement) and disagreement in the activity sense (having a disagreement). This paper deals with the question of what it is for two people to have a disagreement. First, I present and reject the thesis according to which having a disagreement is a matter of expressing conflicting attitudes. I argue that this is not sufficient for having a disagreement: two people can express conflicting attitudes without having a disagreement. Second, I present and reject the thesis according to which having a disagreement involves not only the expression of conflicting attitudes, but also the persuasive attempt to bring the other around to one's view. I argue that this is not necessary for having a disagreement: two people can have a disagreement without trying to change each other's minds. Finally, I put forward an alternative account that goes beyond the mere expression of conflicting attitudes, but that does not go as far as to posit the attempt to change someone's mind. Having a disagreement, I submit, is a matter of expressing conflicting attitudes and demanding agreement, that is, advancing the normative claim that the other should share one's attitude.

**Keywords** Disagreement · Having a disagreement · Persuasion · Argument · Demand

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## 1 Introduction

In the current literature it is common to distinguish two ordinary senses of ‘disagreement’. Disagreement can be a kind of *state* people are in or a type of linguistic *activity* people engage in.<sup>1</sup>

MacFarlane (2014) is one of those who draw the distinction:

When we characterize two people as disagreeing, we sometimes mean that they are *having a disagreement*—engaging in a kind of activity—and sometimes just that they *are in disagreement*, which is a kind of state. (119)

On the one hand,

People can be *in disagreement* even if they do not know of each other. The ancient Greeks were in disagreement with the ancient Indians about whether the bodies of the dead should be burned or buried even before Herodotus and other travelers made this disagreement known to them. Whether two people are in disagreement is a function of their first-order attitudes, not of their attitudes towards each other. (119)

On the other hand,

Whether they are *having a disagreement* [...] depends only on their attitudes and actions towards each other. Two people who agree about all the issues at stake can nonetheless be having a disagreement if, through some misunderstanding, they take their views to differ, or if one is playing devil’s advocate. The question “Why are you disagreeing with me, if we agree about what is at issue?” is perfectly intelligible. (119)

Most philosophers, like MacFarlane, have focused on the issue of what disagreement in the state sense is. But what are the “attitudes and actions” that constitute the activity of having a disagreement? How should the activity be defined? Despite the distinction between state and activity being commonly drawn, this question has been rarely addressed.

In this paper, I argue that the two main ideas present in the current literature are mistaken and propose a different view. In Sect. 2, I present and reject *EXPRESSION*, the thesis according to which having a disagreement is a matter of expressing conflicting attitudes. I argue that this is not sufficient for having a disagreement. In Sect. 3, I present and reject *PERSUASION*, the thesis according to which having a disagreement is not only the expression of conflicting attitudes, but it also involves the persuasive attempt to bring the other around to one’s view. I argue that this is not necessary for having a disagreement. In Sect. 4, I put forward and defend *DEMAND*. According to *DEMAND*, having a disagreement is a matter of expressing conflicting attitudes and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Endicott (2000), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009): pp. 60–61, Buekens (2011): p. 638, Belleri and Palmira (2013): p. 145, Egan (2013), Baker (2014): p. 171, MacFarlane (2014): pp. 119–120, Marques (2014), Marques and García-Carpintero (2014), Ridge (2014): p. 171, Khoo and Knobe (2016): p. 3, Beddor (2018), Stroud (2019), Worsnip (2019): p. 252, Zeman (2020), Sinclair (2021), Beebe forthcoming.

demanding the agreement of the other, that is, advancing the normative claim that the other should share one's attitude.<sup>2</sup>

Following standard philosophical practice, I will provide the reader with examples and appeal to their intuitions as to whether the situations described qualify as having a disagreement or not. I recognize, though, that intuitions might differ. The extent to which the intuitions I rely on are shared is an issue which is ultimately to be solved through empirical investigation. Studies of that kind, however, are still missing.

## 2 Expression

In this section, first, I present *EXPRESSION*, a characterization of the activity in terms of the expression of conflicting attitudes. Second, I provide a counterexample to it. Not every expression of conflicting attitudes qualifies as having a disagreement.

How to define the activity of having a disagreement? Some authors seem to have assumed a simple and natural characterization. Plunkett and Sundell, for example, define 'disputes' in terms of the expression of a conflict in mental states:

Disagreement, as we use the term, indicates a kind of rational conflict in mental states. [. . .] Disputes, on the other hand, are linguistic exchanges. In particular, disputes are linguistic exchanges that appear to evince or express a disagreement. (Plunkett and Sundell 2021: p. 4)

Zeman (2020), similarly, proposes an activity sense of disagreement according to which two people disagree iff they have conflicting attitudes at some "level of discourse" (Zeman 2020: p. 1656).

I dub this understanding of the activity *EXPRESSION*:

- *EXPRESSION*: A and B are having a disagreement iff they are expressing conflicting attitudes.

Some clarifications before moving on. First, there is an ambiguity with the term 'express' that should be cleared away. Suppose I assert something I do not believe. In a perfectly natural sense, I'm expressing a belief that I do not actually hold. However, in an equally natural sense, which has been called "occasional" (Sattris 1987, p. 81), we could also say that my utterance does not actually express the mental state it seems to express. In this latter sense, a speaker expresses a certain mental state only in those occasions in which she actually holds it. The notion of expression I use throughout the paper is non-occasional: one can express attitudes that one does not actually have.<sup>3</sup>

Second, it is not important, for the purposes of the present paper, to provide an account of what it is for two attitudes to "conflict". I'm presently content to leave the issue open to debate. The claims I shall put forward are independent from whether a "conflict" between attitudes always entails the presence of incompatible contents or

<sup>2</sup> More precisely, I aim to provide the truth conditions of 'A and B are having a disagreement'. In what follows I will allow myself to be presentationally more flexible, but that is the way I should be understood. Moreover, with 'disagreement', from now on, I mean the activity, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>3</sup> Plunkett and Sundell (2021) should be taken to employ an occasional notion so 'appear to express' in their usage is equivalent to 'express' in my usage.

not, or from whether it sometimes includes affective-conative attitudes or not. It will be sufficient to have at our disposal relatively uncontroversial cases of “conflicting attitudes”. Any pair of attitudes that are capable of being the two positions at stake in a disagreement will count as conflicting.

Third, I will remain neutral with respect to the issue of the relation between the activity of having a disagreement and the state of being in disagreement. It is reasonable to think that “conflicting attitudes” will correspond to disagreement in the state sense. If this were true, then the three competing theses about the activity considered in this paper would all have it that if two speakers are having a disagreement, then they also are in the state of being in disagreement (assuming they are sincere). However, this matter might be more controversial than it *prima facie* seems. Some, for example MacFarlane (2014), think that the state notion is more fundamental. Others, like Khoo and Knobe (2016), suggest the opposite and seem to have advanced the hypothesis that even beliefs with incompatible contents might sometimes fail to qualify as a disagreement in the state sense. The following arguments will not require me to take a stance on this issue either.

EXPRESSION, as it stands, would plausibly need some finessing.<sup>4</sup> I shall neglect such issues about details. My objection aims at the core of the idea. EXPRESSION is a natural thought. Take the following dialogue:

A: 6029 is a prime number.  
B: No, 6029 is not a prime number.

A and B are having a disagreement, it seems, because they are expressing thoughts that stand in a certain relation.

However, here is a counterexample to EXPRESSION:

- EVERYONE- HAS- THEIR- OWN- TASTE:

A: This cake is not tasty.  
B: Really? I think it’s delicious. But, it’s okay if you don’t like it, everyone has their own taste.  
A: Right! *De gustibus*.

A and B have different opinions about the cake. However, neither is calling the opinion of the other into question. Each considers it as legitimate as their own. A and B are expressing conflicting attitudes, but they are not having a disagreement. EXPRESSION fails to provide sufficient conditions.<sup>5</sup>

What is missing from EXPRESSION? PERSUASION offers an answer.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the following dialogue evinces conflicting attitudes, but the speakers are not having a disagreement: A: “Hey B, you know we disagree about x, right?” B: “Yes I know. We definitely disagree about x, because you think that p and I think that not-p.”

<sup>5</sup> The claim that that A and B are not having a disagreement is compatible with the claim that B disagreed when she uttered ‘I think it’s delicious’. Moreover, the claim that they are not having a disagreement is compatible with the claim that the conflicting attitudes they are expressing constitute a disagreement in the state sense.

### 3 Persuasion

In this section, first, I present PERSUASION, the thesis according to which two speakers expressing conflicting attitudes qualify as having a disagreement only if there is an attempt to persuade the interlocutor to change her mind. Second, I provide a counterexample to it. Two persons can have a disagreement without attempting to change each other's mind.

Charles Stevenson famously included in his definition of disagreement “a motive for altering or calling into question the attitude of the other” (Stevenson 1944: p. 2). Sinclair (2021) proposes a characterization of the activity inspired by Stevenson's insight.<sup>6</sup> Abstracting from some complexities that need not interest us here, Sinclair suggests the following view:

- PERSUASION: A and B are having a disagreement iff they are expressing conflicting attitudes and at least one of them is attempting to change the attitude of the other.<sup>7</sup>

PERSUASION would need some finessing as well. In particular, not *any* attempt to change the attitude of the other will do. I might try to change your mind, say, by employing very subtle techniques, like exposing you to certain smells. Or I might put a psychoactive substance in your drink. These will not count as cases of having a disagreement. A way to exclude these sorts of cases is taking the relevant actions to be attempts to *persuade*, by linguistic means, the other to change her mind. In fact, I take this to be the spirit of Sinclair's proposal (Cf. Sinclair 2021: pp. 83–84). However, once again, the objection I am about to put forward goes through regardless of these matters of finessing.

I think there is a lot to say in favor of PERSUASION. In particular, it solves EXPRESSION's problem. In EVERYONE- HAS- THEIR- OWN- TASTE there is no “persuasive attempt”, so PERSUASION correctly predicts that A and B are not having a disagreement.

Here is, though, a counterexample to PERSUASION:

- I- AM- NOT- TRYING- TO- CHANGE- YOUR- MIND:

A: P.

B: Look, I'm not trying to change your mind. But I think you should. Your position is untenable, for the following reasons: ...

A: I don't want to change your mind either. But you are misinterpreting the evidence. Everything you said shows that we should believe that P.

B: I beg to differ...

Neither A nor B is attempting to change the mind of the other.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, both call into question the attitude of the other by explicitly stating that they consider it

<sup>6</sup> Sinclair, though, ends up neglecting the “calling into question” element and proposes a view only in terms of a “motive to change”. However, at least *prima facie*, trying to alter (or change) is not the same thing as calling into question.

<sup>7</sup> For Sinclair's original statement see Sinclair (2021): p. 91. The differences in that, more complex, formulation do not make it immune to the objection I will put forward.

<sup>8</sup> Notice that the fact that A and B are not *attempting* to persuade the other (given the lack of intention to do so), is compatible with one of them ending up *persuading* the other (i.e. changing her mind without trying to do so).

wrong to hold. Furthermore, each justifies her own position and defends it from the reasons advanced by the other. That is, each is *arguing* in favor of her own position.<sup>9</sup> A and B are having a disagreement. PERSUASION fails to provide necessary conditions.

We have seen that having a disagreement is not just a matter of expressing conflicting attitudes. PERSUASION fixes the old problem, but creates a new one. What is it, then, that people do when they have a disagreement?

## 4 Demand

In rejecting PERSUASION, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. In this section, I propose a view that agrees with PERSUASION in two important respects. First, something is missing from EXPRESSION. Second, the missing element “seeks” to establish agreement. However, unlike PERSUASION, the characterization I put forward does not posit an attempt to change the interlocutor’s mind as an essential aspect of having a disagreement.

In Sect. 4.1, I present DEMAND and show how it differs from EXPRESSION and PERSUASION. In Sect. 4.2, I argue that DEMAND is extensionally adequate. In Sect. 4.3, I answer two possible objections.

### 4.1 Demand

- DEMAND: A and B are having a disagreement iff they are expressing conflicting attitudes and at least one of them is *demanding* that her attitude be shared by the other.

In my usage, demanding consists in advancing the *normative* claim that the other *should*, or is *required*, to agree (i.e. to share the attitude expressed).<sup>10</sup>

DEMAND goes beyond EXPRESSION, but it does not go as far as PERSUASION goes. On the one hand, one can express one’s view without demanding that the other share it. A speaker can express the belief that p, and at the same time express the belief that the interlocutor is not required to share her attitude. Ridge (2003) has already made this point:

I might judge that abortion is morally bad but not think others should share that judgment and therefore keep my mouth shut about it. Or if I say anything, I might say, ‘Abortion is wicked, but don’t believe it because it’s even worse to be the sort of person who has views on such matters.’ (571)

<sup>9</sup> See Blair (2004) and Micheli (2012) for the idea that *arguing* does not necessarily entail the attempt to persuade one’s interlocutor. Arguing can sometimes consist in justifying one’s position and situating one’s discourse with respect to the discourse of the other, without the presence of persuasive attempts. Among other things, we often argue when the possibilities of reaching agreement are deemed to be zero.

<sup>10</sup> The sense of ‘demand’ I employ here might depart from the common sense of the word, which is often stronger. However, ‘demand’ has already a history of use in highly theoretical, related, contexts. In particular, see Kant (2000), who has inspired the main thesis defended in Sect. 4. (My greatest philosophical debt, however, is undoubtedly to the work of Charles Stevenson.)

On the other hand, one can demand the interlocutor's agreement and, at the same time, manifest no desire to change their mind. Thinking and saying that the interlocutor should share one's attitude entails in no way an actual attempt to make her share it.

A demand, moreover, is typically attended by reasons. A speaker often *argues* in support of their thesis. She can and often does explain *why* one is required to hold the attitude she is expressing.

## 4.2 Extensional adequacy

### 4.2.1 Everyone has their own taste

In EVERYONE- HAS- THEIR- OWN- TASTE, A and B are expressing conflicting attitudes, but neither is demanding that their attitude be shared by the other. DEMAND, unlike EXPRESSION, correctly predicts that A and B are not having a disagreement.

### 4.2.2 I am not trying to change your mind

In I- AM- NOT- TRYING- TO- CHANGE- YOUR- MIND, A and B, besides expressing conflicting attitudes, are both demanding the agreement of the other, even if neither is actually attempting to bring about the agreement. DEMAND, unlike PERSUASION, correctly predicts that A and B are having a disagreement.

### 4.2.3 Simple denials

- SIMPLE- DENIAL

A: P.

B: No, not-P.

Simple cases like this one are intuitively cases where A and B are having a disagreement. Can DEMAND account for this?

It seems plausible to hold that when someone asserts something, one is, in most contexts, implicitly demanding the agreement of the audience. Gibbard and Ridge seem to have made this point.

Gibbard (1990) says that

Conversation is full of implicit demands and pressures. Suppose I confidently expound astrology, and you give no credence. The result will be discomfort: in effect I demand that what I say be accepted, and you will not accede. The discussion is no longer cooperative; it is strained; it threatens to become a quarrel. (172)

Ridge (2003) agrees:

Allan Gibbard claims that in making a moral utterance part of what a speaker is doing is, 'demanding that the audience accept what he says, that it share the state of mind he expresses' (172). Once we distinguish this from Gibbard's more controversial claim that in making assertions we are claiming to be an

authority of some kind, this idea is plausible, both with respect to the expression of ordinary descriptive beliefs and the expression of moral judgments. [...] The reason I only ‘in effect’ make an ‘implicit’ demand that what I say be accepted is that this is merely a pragmatic element of what I say. (570-1)<sup>11</sup>

Both Gibbard and Ridge recognize that the “implicit demand” can be cancelled or “revoked”. This is, indeed, what happens in *EVERYONE- HAS- THEIR- OWN- TASTE*.

If it’s plausible that one implicitly demands agreement simply by asserting something, then it’s plausible to think that in cases like *SIMPLE- DENIAL* the speakers are implicitly demanding that their attitude be shared. *DEMAND* correctly predicts that A and B are having a disagreement.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.2.4 Let’s go to a cinema tonight

A theory of the activity must account for the sorts of cases described by Stevenson:

A. “Let’s go to a cinema tonight.” B. “I don’t want to do that. Let’s go to the symphony.” A continues to insist on the cinema, B on the symphony. This is disagreement in a perfectly conventional sense. (Stevenson 1963: p. 26)

It seems quite clear, in this case, that A and B are both demanding the agreement of the other. If this is correct, then *DEMAND* correctly predicts that they are having a disagreement.

### 4.3 Possible objections

#### 4.3.1 Agree to disagree

- *AGREE- TO- DISAGREE*

A: P.

B: No.

A: Let’s agree to disagree?

B: Okay.

One might object to *DEMAND* that, in *AGREE- TO- DISAGREE*, it is not the case that A and B are having a disagreement, even if they are expressing conflicting attitudes and (implicitly) demanding the agreement of the other.

<sup>11</sup> See also Ridge (2013): “I can advise you to believe in God simply by asserting that God exists. For to assert that p is not only to express the belief that p; it is also to exert a kind of conversational pressure on one’s interlocutor to adopt the belief that p. [...] The pressure can be cancelled, as one can say that p, but then go on to say things like, “but you needn’t believe it on my say so; I am not a very good judge of these things,” and “though I am not terribly sure about that.” All the same, if one asserts that p with none of these caveats, then one has exerted a kind of uncancelled conversational pressure in favor of the belief that p.” (19) Stevenson (1963) makes similar remarks: “Just as a factual sentence typically invites-so-to-speak the hearer to share the speaker’s expressed belief, so an evaluative sentence (though it may in part do the same thing) typically invites-so-to-speak the hearer to share the speaker’s expressed attitude”. (209)

<sup>12</sup> As noted by MacFarlane, one of the speakers could be playing devil’s advocate and they would be still having a disagreement. *DEMAND* is not at odds with this consideration, given that the speaker playing devil’s advocate would still be demanding, although insincerely, the agreement of the other.



My reply is that A and B are having a disagreement but immediately stop it. In fact, the expressions *agree to disagree* and *agree to differ*, are typically used to describe situations in which two speakers stop a disagreement in progress rather than avoiding having one.<sup>13</sup>

### 4.3.2 You should not change your mind

Here is another possible counterexample to DEMAND:

- YOU- SHOULD- NOT- CHANGE- YOUR- MIND

A: P.

B: Look, you shouldn't change your mind. But let me tell you why I think you are totally wrong: ...

A: I don't think you should change your mind either. But *you* are wrong. Here is why: ...

A and B, one might object, are having a disagreement, but neither is claiming that the other should share their attitude.

My answer is that, as long as a speaker is conveying that her own position is better than the position of the other, she is—besides expressing a conflicting attitude—demanding the agreement of the other. Consider what it is to cancel a demand. In EVERYONE- HAS- THEIR- OWN- TASTE, for example, the demands put forward by the speakers are successfully revoked. They are successfully revoked, because the speakers are conveying that the view expressed by the other is as legitimate as their own. The two attitudes expressed, although conflicting, are considered equally good by both speakers.

Now, in YOU- SHOULD- NOT- CHANGE- YOUR- MIND, the speakers are explicitly saying that the other should not change her mind. If, in saying so, they meant that the other's position is as good as their own, then, I think, the dialogue would be puzzling. What would 'your position is as good as mine, but you are wrong' mean? I grant, though, that there are felicitous ways to understand that exchange. The speakers might mean, for example, that the other has practical reasons not to abandon her (wrong) view.<sup>14</sup>

However, if so, DEMAND would still predict that A and B are having a disagreement. A and B, in saying that the other is wrong, are each conveying that their own attitude—respectively the belief that P and the belief that not-P—is better than the attitude expressed by the other. This latter demand is *not* revoked by their assertion that

<sup>13</sup> For example, according to the Oxford English Dictionary to 'agree to differ' is to '[c]ease to argue about something because neither party will compromise or be persuaded'. For the Merriam-Webster Dictionary "agree to disagree" is "to agree not to argue anymore about a difference of opinion".

<sup>14</sup> For example, one might think that the other should not change her mind, because changing her mind would have some negative consequences. Alternative explanations that do not appeal to practical reasons are, of course, possible. The consideration that follows, though, would remain, *mutatis mutandis*, the same.

the other should not, from a practical point of view, change her mind.<sup>15</sup> The speakers in YOU- SHOULD- NOT- CHANGE- YOUR- MIND, unlike those in EVERYONE- HAS- THEIR- OWN- TASTE, are expressing conflicting attitudes and demanding agreement, in the sense that they are claiming that the position of the other is not as good as their own. Therefore, the objection fails: according to DEMAND, A and B are having a disagreement.

## 5 Conclusion

The phenomenon and the concept of disagreement have been and continue to be philosophically relevant in a variety of ways. Despite the widespread distinction between a stative sense and an active sense of disagreement, little work has been done on how the activity should be defined. This issue should also concern those who are interested only in defining the state notion of disagreement, given that, as I have already mentioned, the relation between the two senses is still a controversial matter. For all we know, the activity sense might be explanatorily prior.

In this paper, I have argued that the extant views on the activity of having a disagreement are mistaken and offered a definition in terms of demanding agreement. In a certain sense, I have put forward only a *minimal* definition of the activity (cf. Zeman 2020). I have not said what it is for two attitudes to “conflict” and I have by no means offered a full account of what a demand consists in. For the moment, I content myself with the claim that having a disagreement requires *more* than expression and *less* than persuasion. The right account lies in the normative notion of demanding agreement. How to spell this out fully I leave for future research.

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## Declarations

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**Ethics approval** Not applicable.

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<sup>15</sup> In so asserting, one is not conveying that the two attitudes expressed are equally good; one, instead, is expressing the belief that the other should not, from a practical point of view, change her mind and demanding that the other agree. And no conflicting attitudes have been expressed in YOU- SHOULD- NOT- CHANGE- YOUR- MIND about that. A and B are having a disagreement about whether P. They are *not* having a disagreement about whether they are practically required to believe that P or not. They would be having a disagreement of this kind if, for example, A asserted (and demanded) that B is practically required to hold the belief that P and B denied it.

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