Reasons for the Occasional Illusion of Faultless Disagreement

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Values in Argumentative Discourse (PTDC/MHC-FIL/0521/2014)

Value Seminar, 28.9.2018

Brogaard on Faultless Moral Disagreement

"Relativism does better than contextualism on several counts. First, it can explain the regularity and faultlessness of moral disagreement. If right and wrong are relative expressions, then it is obvious that moral disagreement will be a frequently recurring phenomenon. For the truth-value of moral judgements will then vary with the moral standards of the evaluator." (Brogaard 2008: 392)

Motivation and Goal of the Paper

- Brogaard lays out a version of contextualism she calls *perspectivalism* that is, in fact, a form of relativism.
- Throughout the paper she makes the implicit assumption that we have clearcut intuitions of faultless disagreement about statements involving moral terms like 'wrong'.
- There are only few moral relativists like Wong, Harman, Brogaard and she misrepresents the empirical reality of moral disagreement. But I'm not going to argue for that.
- The goal of my paper is to show how such intuitions, in the (rare) cases when they arise, can be explained in ways compatible with invariantism and contextualism.

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Two Types of Evaluative Terms

(1) Abortion is wrong. [deontic]

(2) Democracy is good. [axiological]

Traditional Two-layered Contextualism				
linguistic meaning	+	context	⇒	semantic content
semantic content	+	CEs	⇒	extension

- Content: Abortion is wrong according to Alice's criteria.
- Context: Alice=speaker, time of utterance, etc.
- CEs: determined by the context in a way governed by linguistic rules.

Alethic Assessor-Relativism

The same semantic content may be true relative to one assessor and false relative to another assessor. The assessor is part of the CEs.

- Content: Abortion is wrong.
- Context: Alice=speaker, time of utterance, etc.
- CEs: assessor (Alice, Bob, Carol, someone else) + some features independently of context.

Faultless disagreement: Same content true if Bob is the assessor, false if Alice is the assessor. Both agree on the content ($\sim$ subject matter).

Type 1 Alethic Nonindexical Contextualism

Brogaard (2008) calls this *perspectivalism*, others would call it *nonindexical contextualism*:

Type 1 Nonindexical Contextualism

An assessor is stored in the CEs, which under normal circumstances is determined from the context of utterance by linguistic rules and coincides with the speaker of utterance. Under unusual circumstances (speech reports, attitude ascriptions) the assessor may vary from the speaker and is not determined by the context.

Type 2 Alethic Nonindexical Contextualism

Type 2 Nonindexical Contextualism

A non-traditional additional ingredient like an assessor is part of the context, and content may vary for some expressions like 'wrong' and 'good' when this non-traditional ingredient of the context varies.

- This position does *not* allow for faultless disagreement and should therefore be classified as contextualism.
- It may be called 'nonindexical contextualism' because the assessor is not fixed/determined/constituted by the deictic center I-here-now.
- Many authors do not further distinguish this from traditional contextualism. (The difference can matter a lot, though!)

Type 3 Alethic Nonindexical Contextualism

Type 3 Nonindexical Contextualism

An assessor is part of the context ($\neq$ speaker), which in turn determines the assessor in the CEs. The respective context-sensitive expressions like 'wrong' or 'good' vary with varying CEs.

Honorable mention. This is an odd position that AFAIK no one has ever defended. Since there is no rule that determines which assessor is in the context and assessor$\neq$speaker, it seems equi-expressive to relativism. Therefore, I do not consider it further in the paper.

Weak Relativism

Weak relativism allows one to translate a truth-relative statement into a contextualist framework by eliminating the respective modal parameters and reifying them in a language with a monadic truth predicate.

Example: Translate $w \vDash_{ML} \Box P(x)$ to $\vDash_{FOL} \forall w[w_0 R w \rightarrow P(x, w)]$

- If we allow this, then an alethic moral relativist is not *really* an alethic relativist.
- The truth-relative perspectivity can be eliminated in favor of traditional contextualism with monadic truth predicate.
- This reduces relativism vs. contextualism to the question of which formulation is better suited for a logical semantic representation.

Strong Relativism

The the truth and falsity of statements containing the context-sensitive term is *irreducibly* depending on the modal parameter. Any translation into an invariant contextualist approach with monadic truth-predicate would be unfaithful.

- Weak moral relativism is merely a way of expressing moral disagreements about the same semantic content, but a contextualist can obtain a similar result by considering the disagreement about the same sentence, for instance.
- In contrast, according to strong assessor relativism, the dependence of truth on an assessor is *irreducible*. (Likewise for other forms of strong relativism.)

R1: Traditional Context-Sensitivity of Moral Terms

(3) Capitalism is good (for me as an entrepreneur).

- In some context this is a perfectly ordinary *intended speech act content*. Discourse participants *know* that every use of 'good' may be elliptical in this sense and that the benefactor complement PP could refer to almost any individual or group.
- So if I am aware that you are aware of that, and you disagree, wouldn't it make sense to take into consideration that you may have a different PP in mind than I?
- Maybe we're both right, in a way!

$\Rightarrow$ This may look like faultless disagreement but is still based on classical contextualism and a form of misunderstanding by not grasping the content intended by the speaker.

R1: Rare Cases of Faultless Disagreement

To make things more confusing, there are rare cases for which aggregative value predicates like 'good' and 'wrong' might have a relativist reading:

(4) This burger is good. ['good' as a surrogate for 'tasty']

(5) Marrying Jim was wrong. [a rare, agent-relative subjectivist reading of 'wrong']

But there is no *linguistic* evidence that such readings are the only ones, on the contrary they appear to be rare. Compare to:

(6) This is the wrong screw size. [whether the screw fits or not does not even depend on *anyone's* state of mind and the assessor is irrelevant]

(CE) Credence-Error Principle. i. The higher X's degree of subjective credence in an assertion ϕ is, the lower X's subjective credence in the possibility of being in error about ϕ. Vice versa, ii. the higher X judges the possibility of being in error about assertion ϕ, the lower is X's subjective credence in ϕ.

(PDE) Peer-disagreement Error Principle. If X's subjective credence in an assertion ϕ is a, a is above some threshold T for tentatively accepting ϕ, and X learns that an epistemic peer disagrees with X's acceptance of ϕ to subjective credence a, then under normal circumstances X should revise a to a subjective credence b that is lower than a.

R2: Being Reasonable with Peers

Scenario:

- Alice and Bob are epistemic and/or moral peers.
- Alice and Bob disagree about: (1) Abortion is wrong.
- Alice's credence in (1) is just above her threshold for acceptance, though.
- It is perfectly reasonable for Alice to consider it very likely that Bob is right.

$\Rightarrow$ Such cases may look a lot like faultless disagreement, even though upon sincere reflection they are not.

R3: Incompleteness of Effective Value Systems

Effective Value System: a system of values that is in place in a group, at least partially guiding actions and opinions of most members of the group.

Lack of Specificity Thesis: Effective value systems tend to be incomplete because of a lack of specifity.

Example: "Do not kill!" has many purported exceptions such as war, abortion, self-defense, stand your ground laws, dowry killings in India, etc.

Note: From a normative point of view the kind of defeasibility at play ought to be entirely rule-governed, except that the rules are not fully specified. (similar to Tweety, the penguin, and not like in probability theory or theory revision)

R4: Differences about the Reach of Morality

- Social norm $\neq$ moral norm: Some moral norms are social norms but not all social norms are moral norms.
- Different value systems have different reach into our lives:
  - For a genuine liberal, the No Harm principle is a guideline and individual freedom should be maximal as long as it doesn't hamper someone else's freedom ("sane, safe, consensual").
  - For the liberal the reach of morality is very narrow: Many effective social norms are not morally relevant at all.
- When the liberal observes a moral dispute between two persons with broader conceptions of morality (say, a catholic and an evangelist), it may appear to make sense to attribute faultless disagreement to them.

$\Rightarrow$ The correct way to model these disputes is contextualist, though not alethic contextualist. The DPs are drawing inferences from different background theories and implicitly argue about those, where only one of the theories can be true and both may be false.

Summary & Conclusions

- Only strong alethic moral relativism is a candidate for genuine *moral relativism*.
- We sometimes have *seemingly good reasons* why it may appear to make sense to attribute faultless disagreement.
- For example politeness: The courtesy of recognizing someone else as a peer.
- Except for few cases of 'good' and 'wrong' being surrogates for highly subjective assessments, many intuitions of faultless disagreement are *misleading* because they do not support strong relativism.
- To argue for faultless moral disagreement, one has to argue for the respective metaethical theory from which it would follow, and not, vice versa, from the disagreement to the metaethical theory.

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