

Asymmetric Disagreements

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In the literature on disagreement in belief, it is not uncommon to start with a case where one party believes p , and the other party believes $\neg p$. And in that case there is a natural midpoint between the two initially represented states, namely suspension of judgment between p and $\neg p$.

But there is not always so natural a midpoint. If we had started instead with a case where one party suspended judgment about whether p , and the other believed that p , then there is not so clearly a midpoint. If we represent the debate not using notions like belief, or suspension, but instead using credences, this case may not seem so pressing. If one party's credence in p is 0.8, and the other party's credence is 1, then there will be a midpoint, namely 0.9.

I'm not convinced this is really a natural half-way point between the two views. The mathematical modelling of credences may be concealing more than it reveals here. After all, we started off with one party being certain that p , and the other party thinking p was much more probable than not, but not certain. If both party's adopt a credence of 0.9 in p , then at the end both parties will think that p is much more likely than not, but not certain. Once we translate the numerical talk back into natural language, the idea that there is a midpoint, an attitude that is symmetrically related to the two initial attitudes, gets less plausible.

To make that last point more vivid, imagine that p is actually a particular instance of excluded middle, $q \vee \neg q$. And the two parties to our dispute are an intuitionist logician and a classical logician. The intuitionist logician thinks that excluded middle is not a theorem, and particular instances of excluded middle can have any probability whatsoever, while the classical logician thinks they are a theorem, and they should each get probability 1.

Now assume we have a broadly conciliationist approach to disagreement about belief. We think that each party should adopt a credence in p somewhere between the two initial credences. To do any such thing will be to take a very asymmetric stance on the underlying disagreement about structures. The classical logician thinks that every credence between 0.8 and 1 in p is incoherent. So any credence in p that is between the initial credences will be one that one party, but not the other, regards as incoherent.

One way to think about what's going on here is that the two logicians have a pair of related disputes. One dispute is about a local matter, the credal attitude to take towards p . But another dispute is about a global matter, namely which attitudes are coherent ones to take towards p . And what's driving the problems so far is that the

only way to adopt a conciliatory attitudes towards the local question seems to be to take a side on the global question.

Once we see that way of generating a kind of conflict, examples are easy to multiply. I'll mention three more, one involving decision theory, one involving value theory, and one in epistemology.

Assume we are trying to figure out the value of a bet. The bet has value 0 if p is false, and 1 if p is true. And p , in this case, is the proposition that a particular fair coin, about to be flipped, will land heads. So the probability of p is 0.5. Orthodox decision theory says that the value of the bet should equal the probability of p , namely 0.5. Recently, Lara Buchak has defended a heterodox alternative to orthodox decision theory. She thinks that orthodoxy doesn't take into account sufficiently the decision maker's attitude towards risk. The orthodox view is that a bet like this, that pays 1 if p and 0 otherwise, has value x , where $x = \text{Pr}(p)$. Buchak thinks the value of the bet is $f(x)$, where f is a function representing the agent's attitude towards risk. If the agent is risk averse, in general $f(x) < x$, while if the attitude is risk seeking, $f(x) > x$. So let's imagine that after talking to the decision maker a bit about her attitude towards risk, Buchak advises the decision maker to adopt $f(x) = x^2$. So the value of this bet will be 0.25.

Now our decision maker is confused. We can imagine she has advice from an orthodox decision theorist, telling her the value of the bet is 0.5. And she has advice from Buchak, telling her the value of the bet is 0.25. Note that if she adopts any position intermediate between these two, say that she thinks the value of the bet is $\frac{3}{8}$, then she'll be agreeing with Buchak, and against the orthodox decision theorist, on the question of which values are permissible in a decision problem like this one. For again, Buchak and the orthodox theorist disagree about two questions. They disagree on the local question of how this decision maker should value the bet. But they also disagree on the global question of which valuations are permissible.

Or consider a dispute between a value monist and a value pluralist. Imagine our value monist thinks any given thing can be given a value, v , which is some real number. Our value pluralist thinks that values should not be represented as numbers, but as vectors, such as $\langle v_1, v_2, v_3 \rangle$. We'll make some simplifying assumptions: our pluralist believes there are just three kinds of value, and the first of them is the kind our monist thinks is the one and only value there is. And we'll assume, without going into details about how this is to be done, that our pluralist has a decision rule for choosing given the vector values of the options.

Now we face a particular question, how to value some object. The monist says its value is v . The pluralist says that its value is $\langle v, v_2, v_3 \rangle$. How should they conciliate between these two views? We might treat the monist as really saying that the value of the object is $\langle v, 0, 0 \rangle$. So the moderate position is that the value is the average

value of those vectors, namely $\langle v, \frac{v_2}{2}, \frac{v_3}{2} \rangle$. But this is to concede a lot to the pluralist. It is to hold that values are, or at least are representable as, vectors. It is to hold that our decision rule should be able to take these vector values as inputs. Our monist might disagree with these very general claims. But it seems any value that is somehow between v and $\langle v, v_2, v_3 \rangle$ will adopt them.

Last, and stop me if you think you've heard this before, we get a similar issue about disagreement. Imagine that p is the proposition that conciliationism of some kind or other about disagreement is at least sometimes correct. Imagine one party starts out with a credence in this of 0, and the other with a credence of 1. If we conciliate, we are assuming that the first party is mistaken. There isn't any credence that we can adopt in p , in light of the disagreement, that doesn't in some sense presuppose the first party is mistaken.

There are three broad classes of response we could have to these kinds of disagreements.

1. Allow that the less demanding side has a huge advantage in structural battles.
2. Give up on the kinds of coherence constraints that are driving the argument.
3. Qualify, perhaps to the point of giving up, our commitment to conciliationism.

Let's take those in turn.

The first option is to simply accept that what I'll call the liberal side of the arguments has a massive advantage in cases of disagreement. The liberals, as I'm using the term here, are the ones who have more permissive attitude to structural constraints. So the intuitionist logician is a liberal; they think that credence functions that do not give probability 1 to classical theorems may be acceptable. The heterodox decision theorist is a liberal; they think that it might be permissible to be approved of by orthodox decision theory, but one need not. The value pluralist is in many ways a liberal. They think there are some particular things, or events, that have only one kind of value. But they think that not all valuable things can be compared on a common scale. And the part-time conciliationist is a liberal. As I've defined them, they think it might be permissible in particular debates to conciliate, but also that certain kinds of steadfastness are permissible as well.

There are two problems with this approach. The first is that it requires us to really give up quite a lot, and it is very implausible that all the arguments for all the things that we'd have to give up are weaker than the arguments for conciliationism. I'm somewhat sympathetic to taking intuitionism seriously. But of course the argument generalises. The same argument can be used against the person who thinks it is a structural constraint that we give all contradictions probability 0. Or against the person who thinks (like Buchak) that the sure-thing principle is a good

principle of decision-theoretic reasoning. To object to conciliationism here, I just need to win one of these structural battles on behalf of the less permissive theory, and I think it's very probable that one of them can be won.

The other problem is that this approach seems unfair, in a way that is inimical to good debate. The classical logician is debating their friend the intuitionist logician. And the classical logician knows that unless they convince their friend to be certain that classical logic is right, the logic of conciliationism will force them to adopt a credal attitude that classical logic says is incoherent. Yet they feel they have very good reasons to adopt classical logic. Now why should they be put in this unfair position? Why should there be an asymmetry between the person arguing for a coherence constraint on rational thought and the one arguing against it? I suspect that it will be hard to answer those questions without adopting premises strong enough to support a kind of Pyrrhonian scepticism about philosophy. But I won't push this point here.

Instead, let's move on to the second option: giving up coherence. Think again about the dispute between the two logicians. And separate out two propositions, p , the instance of excluded middle at issue, and C , the proposition that coherence requires that classical tautologies get credence 1. What happens if we conciliate on both of these propositions? In particular, what happens if the parties adopt a credence in each proposition that is half-way between each of the two initial credences? The result is that our parties have credence 0.9 in p , and 0.5 in C . So they have a credence that they half-think is incoherent.

Doing this does not seem to result in the asymmetry or unfairness that we saw earlier. It is true that the attitude that is adopted towards p is one that only the intuitionist logician thinks is coherent. But that doesn't mean they agree with the intuitionist; indeed they half think the intuitionist is mistaken. There is still one sense in which the parties concede to the intuitionist; they act as if the intuitionist is correct. But they do not believe, or at least fully believe, that the intuitionist is right.

What can we say about such a view? One complaint might be that it does not make sense. The view requires that our parties have views that are, by their own lights, probably incoherent. Many philosophers think this kind of akrasia is incoherent; one must do things that are by one's lights coherent. I'm not convinced this is a particularly large problem though. If an agent is responsive to their evidence, and does not know what their evidence is, then they should adopt attitudes they do not know to be correct ones in light of their current situation. And it is plausible that agents should be responsive to their evidence, and that it is not always obvious what one's evidence is. So I don't think this kind of incoherence is problematic.

A bigger complaint, I think, is that the position is under-motivated. The best motivation for conciliationism, I think, comes from the assumption that we must not be akratic. The thought is that when otherwise equal parties disagree, they should first each come to think that it is equally likely that the other party has the rational response to the evidence. Then their expectation of the rational credence to take in response to the evidence should move. Then, and this is the anti-akratic part, they should adjust their credences to line up with their expectations of the rational credence. There are other ways to motivate conciliationism, but this seems to be one of the best. If we give up the anti-akrasia, we lose a lot of motivation for conciliationism.

So option three is to give up the idea that there is, in general, any reason to conciliate. And that's what I think is true. Conciliationism in general leads to trouble. Either it leads to the more liberal view winning almost by default, or it leads to a kind of akrasia that conciliationists themselves have typically taken to be problematic. The trick is to say what makes conciliationism even plausible in particular cases. Why is stubborn dogmatism so implausible, if conciliationism is false?

A full answer would require a somewhat longer paper than this, but here's the short answer.

- When someone has a different opinion to one's own, that is strong (if defeasible) evidence that they have reasons that one lacks.
- It is generally reasonable to move one's attitudes on acquiring evidence that there are reasons one was unaware of for holding an incompatible attitude.
- There are no general rules for when this kind of move is required, nor for how strong the move should be when it is made.

If that picture is right, conciliationism will deliver the most implausible results in cases where either (a) learning the opinion of the other does not teach us anything about their reasons, or (b) part of what's at issue is how to respond to reasons. In case (a), we do not get a reason to conciliate, but the conciliationist calls for conciliation anyway. In case (b), the conciliationist calls for conciliation over how to respond to reasons, but facts about how to respond to reasons are inputs into how we should deal with disagreement, not issues subject to contest in a disagreement.

What we've been looking at here are instances of (b). The logicians don't just disagree about logic, they disagree about whether, for instance, the fact that some proposition is an instance of excluded middle is a reason to give it maximal probability. And it is even clearer that the decision theorists and the value theorists disagree about reasons.

In general, if one party thinks that R is a conclusive reason to do X , and the other does not, and both parties agree that R is a reason we possess, then conciliationism will be hard. We'll either have the parties do X , hence not conciliating, or have them not do X . In the latter case they will either have to completely agree that R is not a reason to do X , hence not conciliating on the higher-order belief, or be akratic. It looks like there is no way to consistently conciliate and be enkratic. And this is a particular problem for conciliationists who are motivated by enkratic principles.

The best way out of this mess, I believe, is to think that in all fields conciliationism is a mistake, and the right response is something like reasons aggregation. This will typically lead to similar outcomes to what the conciliationist endorses, but not in special cases like (a) and (b). And that's enough to avoid the challenge discussed here.