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Deep Moral Disagreements and Defective Contexts

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Abstract: The key characteristic of deep disagreements is that any attempt to resolve them just reveals new points of disagreement that stem from underlying commitments. Many moral disagreements appear to be like this. Do people have a moral obligation to get vaccinated? Should women always have the right to abortion – or is abortion rarely or never permissible? People who disagree on these issues often accept very different underlying values and commitments. In this paper, I argue that when deep moral disagreements become widespread, they can constitute an obstacle for achieving or sustaining moral progress because the interlocutors of a deep disagreement fail to engage in rational conversation. I develop Fogelin's (1985) thesis, influenced by Wittgenstein, that deep disagreements do not occur in normal conversational circumstances. This is primarily done by applying Robert's (2012) theory of how questions determine the direction and aim of conversation. I argue that the parties of deep disagreement are unable to include new questions in their discourse context that would provide strategies for resolving the first-order moral question (e.g., concerning abortion or vaccines) that they disagree about. I propose that a possible strategy for resolving such deep disagreements by engaging in conversational pretense, but ultimately argue that this strategy faces a number of worries.

Keywords: Deep disagreement, Moral Disagreement, Rational Communication, Dynamic Pragmatics, Moral Progress, Conversational Pretense, Common Ground.

1. Introduction

In cases of deep disagreement, a dispute is symptomatic of a whole system of other commitments or norms that one of the interlocutors accepts and the other rejects. This type of disagreement often arises over *moral* questions. For instance, a progressive and a conservative who disagree about the permissibility of abortion are not only engaged in this first-order moral disagreement. Their moral disagreement is also symptomatic of many other things about which they disagree, such as more fundamental moral standards or commitments, epistemic norms, or religious commitments and supporting empirical facts.

Two main hypotheses are advanced in this paper. The first is that deep disagreements occur in severely defective conversational contexts and that the conditions for rational communication are therefore not met. This claim is supported by giving a detailed account of the obstacles for rational communication by using tools from contemporary dynamic pragmatics. The second hypothesis is that if deep disagreements become widespread and prevalent, they can constitute obstacles for moral progress since the interlocutors are unable to rationally communicate and are thus unable to reach agreement.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, I describe what deep disagreements are and how they might constitute an obstacle for moral progress. In section 3, I argue that deep disagreements can be construed as occurring in defective conversational contexts and that the interlocutors therefore fail to rationally communicate. In section 4, I sketch a strategy for resolving deep disagreements through what I call ‘conversational pretense’ and discuss challenges for this approach.

2. The Metaethical Significance of Deep Moral Disagreements

There are many examples of moral disagreements that appear to be difficult – perhaps impossible – to resolve by getting the parties to the dispute to agree. Do people have a moral obligation to get vaccinated, not just for their own health and safety's sake, but also to protect others? Is affirmative action required to compensate for the inequality suffered by stigmatized groups on the job market, or are such initiatives unfair? Do individuals have an obligation to mitigate their impact on climate change, or are such endeavors futile? Should women have the right to abortion regardless of their reasons for it, or is abortion almost never permissible? Many of these questions are of widespread dispute within and across societies today – and polarization on these issues appears to grow rather than diminish.

While deep disagreements are often both *persistent* and *widespread*, it is not these features that make them interesting. Rather, the key characteristic of deep disagreements is that any attempt to resolve them just reveals other points of disagreement. For instance, two people who disagree about whether one ought to get vaccinated might also disagree not only about the supporting facts (e.g., whether the vaccine contains surveillance chips or whether taking it incurs negligible health risks), but also about more *fundamental norms* and *commitments* (e.g., whose expertise constitutes reason for belief and whether one has an obligation to minimizing the risk for others to get sick).

Why should we care about deep moral disagreements? A first thought is that moral deep disagreements are of metaethical relevance because they support moral scepticism, i.e., the view that we cannot gain moral knowledge.¹ The persistence of moral disagreement and lack of

¹ To clarify, I take *metaethical significance* to mean that it is a phenomenon that has bearing on issues discussed within metaethics, broadly understood as the study of moral discourse, psychology, metaphysics and epistemology.

convergence on moral matters has been highlighted by sceptics about moral knowledge (or moral truths). The perhaps most well-known version of this argument is Mackie's argument from relativity, according to which "radical differences between first order moral judgments" are taken as evidence for skepticism about objective moral truths (Mackie, 1977, pp. 36–38). Roughly, the first step of this argument is to identify that there is widespread disagreement about moral matters and a lack of convergence among the parties of these disputes. The next step is to argue that this observation does not chime well with the hypothesis that people can somehow perceive objective values. Rather, the best explanation for the lack of convergence and persistent moral disagreement is that these differences stem from "people's adherence to and participation in different ways of life" (Mackie, 1977, p. 36).

However, it is not obvious that the phenomenon of deep disagreement can be used to support moral scepticism by this line of argument. The reason is that the sceptical argument has been revised and presented in more modest form. The thought is that it is the prevalence of *peer disagreement* specifically that provides reason for scepticism (McGrath, 2008; Locke, 2017).

In peer disagreements, the parties of the disagreement are peers in the sense that they have access to the same information and ability to assess it. For instance, two moral peers may disagree about whether it is morally obligatory to refrain from factory-farmed meat although they have the same epistemic credentials and agree on all empirical facts (e.g., they know how animals are treated and how likely it is that their consumption habits will affect the industry). The puzzle raised by such peer disagreements is, roughly, that if I disagree with someone who I acknowledge is my epistemic peer, it is rational for me to think that they are just as likely to reach the correct verdict as I am. Hence, peer disagreement undermines the justification for my moral belief since my peer is just as likely to be right (Locke, 2017, p. 504).

Insofar as the most plausible version of the sceptical argument about moral knowledge is one that appeals to peer disagreement, it is not obvious that the prevalence of deep disagreement is relevant to moral scepticism. Deep disagreements appear to be different from peer disagreements since one of the distinctive features of deep disagreements is that the parties of the dispute “would *not* regard each other as equally reasonable, or equally likely to be right about the disputed proposition” (Ranalli and Lagewaard, 2022, p. 6 emphasis added). The parties of a deep disagreement think of themselves as having an epistemic advantage that their interlocutor lacks. If I disagree with someone who I believe to be mistaken about some empirical fact or who I think reasons invalidly, it is rational for me to think that they are less likely than I am to reach the correct verdict. The fact that my interlocutor who I take to be epistemically inferior has reached another moral verdict does not undermine the justification for my own verdict, at least from my perspective. The phenomenon of deep disagreement does therefore not have immediate bearing on arguments for moral scepticism.²

Instead, deep disagreements are of metaethical significance since they can have bearing on our ability to achieve or sustain moral progress. Moral progress is a topic that is receiving increasing attention.³ The type of moral progress that I focus on here follows Macklin’s (1977) approach of viewing moral progress as primarily something societal, rather than individualistic – although the progress of individuals will of course be interconnected to the progress of the democratic society they live in. Macklin (1977) argues that that when we assess whether there has been moral progress, this assessment has a *descriptive* and an *normative* component. The

² My main point here is not to say that it is impossible to construct an argument according to which deep disagreement lead to scepticism. Rather, my main claim is just that the existing skeptical arguments from disagreement to moral scepticism appeal to peer disagreement and that peer disagreement is a different phenomenon from deep disagreement.

³ For an overview of recent developments in this field, see Sauer et al. (2021).

descriptive component consists of pointing out the observable changes within a society over a time-period, whereas the normative component consists of a positive assessment of these changes. If the changes are assessed as positive, they constitute moral progress (Macklin, 1977, p. 373). Hence, I will understand moral progress here as primarily a property of our institutions and societies. It might be implemented directly through more individualized moral progress among policy makers and politicians, or the citizens that elect these politicians and decide on which questions they should prioritize.

Deep disagreements within (or across) societies can create obstacles for moral progress in those societies (or globally) when they become widespread. Such problems concern both the ability to *achieve* new progress and *sustain* existing progress that has previously been made. For instance, while significant progress on women's reproductive rights had been achieved in the US, this progress failed to be sustained as is evidenced by the overturn of *Roe vs. Wade*. To avoid this kind of development on other important moral issues, we must attain a better understanding of how deep disagreements work and our prospects of resolving them.

In the next section, I argue that further inquiry into the conversational mechanisms behind deep disagreements will ultimately lead us to the pessimistic conclusion that the interlocutors of a deep disagreement fail to rationally communicate. I will do so by using tools from contemporary dynamic pragmatics to develop the claim by Fogelin (1985) that deep disagreements do not occur in normal communicative circumstances.

3. Defective Contexts and Deep Disagreements

According to Fogelin, deep disagreements are irresolvable because they “undercut the conditions essential to arguing” (1985, p. 5) since they do not occur under *normal* circumstances. Normal

circumstances, he argues, require “a context of broadly shared beliefs and preferences” (Fogelin, 1985, p. 3). This exemplifies the popular view that the parties of a deep disagreement have different *ways of viewing the world*. For instance, Hazlett maintains that this should be defined as an interconnected set of beliefs about metaphysics and ethics that constitute one’s *worldview*, which is inherited from one’s community (2014, p. 11). Matheson (2021) maintains that the parties of a deep disagreement have a set of principles they endorse, which accounts for the way they assign evidential weight and what they count as evidence. Inspired by Wittgenstein, Fogelin puts the idea in the following way:

“[W]hen we inquire into the source of a deep disagreement, we do not simply find isolated propositions [...] but instead a whole system of mutually supporting propositions (and paradigms, models, styles of acting and thinking) that constitute, if I may use the phrase, a *form of life*” (Fogelin, 1985, pp. 5–6)

There are several more specific views about what a person’s ‘form of life’ or ‘worldview’ includes. For instance, it is thought to include *epistemic* standards about what constitutes evidence and how to assess and acquire it (Kappel, 2021; Matheson, 2021); *moral* standards about what constitutes a moral reason and how to weigh different moral considerations (de Ridder, 2021); *metaphysical* commitments about what exists, including *religious* beliefs (Hazlett, 2014, p. 11); and *linguistic* commitments about the meaning of the words used and their application conditions (Godden and Brenner, 2010).

The purpose of this section is to develop Fogelin’s Wittgensteinian thesis that in deep disagreements, the normal conditions of conversation are not obtained. I will argue that this idea

can be further spelled out and be made more precise by appealing to resources from contemporary dynamic pragmatics.

3.1. Dynamic Pragmatics

The guiding thought of dynamic pragmatics is that the interlocutors of a conversation accept a shared *discourse context* that represents the body of information that they all take for granted, at least for the sake of conversation. The discourse context will be construed here as consisting of three sub-categories. It includes the *common ground*, which is a set of propositions representing common belief (Stalnaker, 2002). It also includes a *to-do list-function* that assigns properties onto each individual interlocutor's to-do list, which represent the actions that they are assumed to be required or permitted to perform (Portner, 2007). Finally, the discourse context includes a *question set*, which is an ordered list of sets of propositions that represent the *questions under discussion* (QUDs) that the interlocutors aim to answer (Roberts, 2012).

The three parts of the discourse context are *standardly* updated by utterances of the three universal clause types: Declaratives update the common ground; imperatives update the to-do list function; and interrogatives update the question set. But the utterance of a sentence might affect the discourse structure in another way (or in more ways) than by its standard function. For instance, a declarative sentence may update a to-do list: by uttering “I will leave in 5 minutes” the speaker adds ‘leaving in 5 minutes’ to her own to-do list.

Moreover, the discourse context may be updated by means of *presupposition accommodation*. This happens when an interlocutor speaks as if something is already part of the discourse structure, even though it has not been added explicitly. For instance, by saying “I’m late

because my cat ran away” the speaker presupposes that she has a cat. In such cases, the other interlocutors may accommodate this content or object to it. For instance, they might try to block the presupposition or at least question its truth by saying, “Wait a minute, I didn’t know you had a cat?”. Speakers may similarly presuppose content in the question set or to-do list. For instance, questions will often be implicitly raised in conversation. Just consider two people who are preparing to go for a walk, but as they look out the window, they see the rain pouring down. One of them might then say, “I think it’s too rainy to go out” and the other responds “It should be fine if we just take raincoats”. In this case, there is an implicit QUD in the question set concerning whether they should go out despite the rain, even though this question was never uttered.

The discourse context is not only updated by utterances, but there can be also content in a discourse structure that is there by *default*. For instance, the interlocutors of a conversation take for granted that it is common ground that the earth is round, that Paris is the capital of France, and that gravity exists.⁴ Moreover, they can also take for granted that certain properties are on their to-do list by default. For example, the Gricean conversational maxims (and other pragmatic principles) can be understood as default items on to-do lists (Roberts, 2006, pp. 215–216; Björkholm, forthcoming). In this way, we might understand conversational norms accepted by the speakers as represented as default items on to-do lists.

This way of modeling discourse is part of a tradition within philosophy of language of treating communication as an overall *cooperative* and *rational* endeavor, where mutually accepted information and common aims are central (Keiser, 2022 chapter 1 and part 1). The phenomenon of deep disagreement appears to be at odds with this conception of discourse since the interlocutors

⁴ See Clark (1996, p. chapter 4) for a deeper discussion of this topic.

of a deep disagreement radically diverge in their values, aims and beliefs. I will now argue that deep disagreements can be helpfully modelled by using dynamic pragmatics precisely by drawing attention to the way that discourse contexts in deep disagreements diverge from the idealized picture of rational conversation.

3.2. Defective Discourse Contexts

I will argue that the parties of a deep disagreement have a *defective* discourse context and that this provides a way to specify the impact that differing ‘forms of life’ have on their ability to resolve their disagreement through rational discourse.

The thought that the discourse structure can be defective was raised by Stalnaker. According to him, a defective context is one in which the interlocutors do not presuppose the same things to be common ground, while a non-defective context is one in which the interlocutors presuppose the same things (cf. Fogelin on “normal” contexts) (Stalnaker, 1978, p. 322; Peet, 2021, p. 193). Stalnaker does not, however, treat defective contexts as a severe problem and is optimistic that such defects will tend to be corrected. As he puts it:

A defective context will have a kind of instability, and will tend to adjust to the equilibrium position of a nondefective context [...] any unnoticed discrepancies between the presuppositions of speaker and addressees is likely to lead to failure of communication. Since communication is the point of the enterprise, everyone will have a motive to try to keep the presuppositions the same. (Stalnaker, 1978, p. 322)

However, Peet (2021) provides a more pessimistic outlook, claiming that defective contexts are not as easily corrected as Stalnaker maintains. He argues that defects are common and often difficult to correct because some commitments that constitute the defect might be central to a person's way of viewing the world.

Our ability to fix a defective context by making a defect explicit depends on our ability to make mutually apparent the existence and nature of the defect [...] It is not always easy to make problematic presuppositions mutually apparent in this way [...] certain presuppositions are more central to the presupposer's understanding of the world than others. These central presuppositions are, in a sense, part of the bedrock against which the agents understand and interpret the rest of the world (Peet, 2021, p. 195)

Peet exemplifies this point with the “All Lives Matter” response to the “Black Lives Matter” demonstrations by arguing that the protestors behind this response do not accept that the significance of black lives *specifically* is called into question by police brutality and other forms of systematic mistreatment. Hence, if members of the two protest groups were to engage in conversation, they would have a defective context, but this defect is not easily corrected since it concerns a disbelief in the extent of systematic racism which is bound up with further ideological commitments.

The type of defective contexts that Peet draws attention to, where presuppositions are central to an interlocutors' way of viewing the world, constitute a starting point of how to understand defective contexts in deep disagreements. Before moving on to explain this further, it should be noted that not all defects within a discourse context will be like this. The discourse

context can have some *benign* defects that do not undercut the interlocutor's ability to communicate in a cooperative manner. This might be because either those defects never come up in the conversation and do not affect the topic discussed, or because those defects are easily corrected since at least one of the interlocutors is ready to give up their presupposition. However, I will argue that a deep disagreement is one where the discourse context is *severely* defective, which means that the interlocutors assume such radically different default presuppositions as they enter conversation that they are ultimately unable to engage in a rational and cooperative conversation at all.

To see how a context might be severely defective, let us start by considering the defects in the common ground. In the dispute about the right to abortion, one speaker might presuppose that the fetus has a soul upon conception, whereas the other might reject the truth of this proposition because they do not believe anyone has a soul. In the dispute over affirmative action, one interlocutor might presuppose that people of stigmatized groups are disadvantaged on the job market because of explicit and implicit biases, whereas the other rejects this belief and generally doubts the prevalence of systematic racism or sexism. Finally, in the dispute about whether one ought to get vaccinated, one interlocutor may presuppose that the vaccines are dangerous whereas the other presupposes that they are safe. Hence, there are non-moral background beliefs that one accepts and the other rejects. These are defects in the common ground.

Moreover, the interlocutors may also have defective to-do list functions. As I mentioned previously, the Gricean conversational maxims can be thought of as default items on to-do lists. Moreover, I argue elsewhere that in much the same way, we can think of other norms as default presuppositions in the discourse structure (Björkholm, forthcoming). This develops a thought from Grice, who maintained that "There are, of course, all sorts of *other* maxims (aesthetic, social or

moral in character) [...] that are also normally observed by participants in talk exchanges” (Grice, 1989, p. 28). Hence, the default items on to-do lists might not only represent conversational norms, but also moral, prudential, aesthetic, and epistemic norms. When the norms presupposed by interlocutors do not align, they have a defective to-do list function. In cases of deep disagreement, one interlocutor might accept an epistemic norm according to which everyone has the property of trusting experts on their to-do list by default, whereas the other interlocutor rejects this norm and instead has the property of trusting other sources of information as a default item on to-do lists.

While these forms of defects are interesting in their own right, I will focus on the role of defective question sets and how the aforementioned defects in the common ground and on to-do list affect QUDs. The reason for focusing on the question set is that it plays a significant role in the structure of well-ordered conversations: QUDs determine the purpose or aim of a conversation since interlocutors are expected to try to resolve what they have explicitly or implicitly accepted into the question set.

3.2.1. Defective Question Sets

The thought that questions play an important role in deep disagreements can also be found in the work of Wright (1995) and Campolo and Turner (2002). Wright offers an interrogative picture of argumentation and reasoning. He contends that in circumstances where reasoning is effortless (which can be compared to ‘normal’ or ‘nondefective’ contexts), we are guided by a “tacit grasp of a particular question” (Wright, 1995, p. 571). Wright calls this the *implicit question* of an argument and purports that to evaluate a claim, it is central to understand which implicit question it is meant to answer (Wright, 1995, p. 572). However, in cases of deep disagreements the argumentation is not effortless in this way (Wright, 1995, p. 583). Campolo and Turner build on

Wrights' account, arguing further that when we reason together, we need a grasp of the implicit question, what the different answers are and what information is required to rank the different answers. When two people reason together to resolve a disagreement, this is "a very small rift that must be seen against an enormous shared background" (Campolo and Turner, 2002, p. 9). In deep disagreements, there is no such shared background that the disagreement occurs against.

Since these authors are primarily concerned with *reasoning*, their focus is somewhat different than mine. But there are many interesting points of convergence, and the accounts can be understood as highlighting something similar from different theoretical perspectives. In what follows, I will use Roberts' QUD framework to give a more detailed account of the role of questions in deep disagreements. I will argue that this both elucidates some of the claims made by these other authors as well as adds new ways of understanding what goes on when interlocutors deeply disagree.

Let us start by considering the structure of the question set in more detail. A QUD is represented in the discourse context by the *set of alternatives* that constitute possible answers to it.⁵ There are two types of questions: *constituent questions* (e.g., "Who won the game?", "Where is Frida?", "What should I get from the store?"), and *polar questions* (e.g., "Did we win the game?", "Is Frida at home?", "Should I get milk from the store?"). A constituent question is represented as a set of polar questions that constitute sub-questions to it and each of these polar questions are represented as the two propositions that constitute 'yes' and 'no' answers. To illustrate:

⁵ Following the view that the semantic content of a question is the set of propositions that constitute answers to it (Karttunen, 1977).

FIGURE 1:

Where is Frida?					
<i>Is Frida at work?</i>		<i>Is Frida at home?</i>		<i>Is Frida at the game?</i>	
Frida is at work	Frida is not at work	Frida is at home	Frida is not at home	Frida is at the game	Frida is not at the game

A proposition among the set of alternatives can sometimes give a *complete* answer to the QUD. But in other cases, it provides only a *partial* answer. For instance, “Frida is at work” provides a complete answer to a QUD about where Frida is, but “Get milk from the store” is not (necessarily) a complete answer to the QUD of what to get from the store insofar as there are additional groceries to be bought.

Roberts argues that once a QUD has been added to the question set, there are two types of moves that an interlocutor can felicitously make. The first is to provide an answer by asserting one of the propositions among the set of alternatives. The other is to propose a *strategy* for answering it. One strategy for answering a constitutive QUD is to introduce one of the polar *sub-questions* among the set of alternatives (Roberts, 2012, p. 5). For instance, a strategy for answering “Where is Frida?” is to ask, “Is Frida at the game?”. A positive answer to this sub-question resolves the original QUD and a negative answer to it narrows down the set of alternatives.

In addition, another option is to ask *auxiliary* questions as strategies for resolving a QUD. This does not amount to asking a logically entailed sub-question, but instead as raising a question that is taken as relevant to solving the QUD in virtue of other contextual factors (Roberts, 2012, p. 7). Auxiliary questions are thus conducive to answering the QUD in virtue of other information that is taken for granted in the discourse structure. For instance, an auxiliary question to “Where

is Frida?” might be “Does Frida work on Thursdays?” – where this is only auxiliary to the QUD about where Frida is if it is already common ground among the interlocutors that it is Thursday. In much the same way as with sub-questions, even a negative answer to an auxiliary question (e.g. “Frida does not work on Thursdays”) can be conducive to resolving a QUD by narrowing down the set of alternatives. To illustrate, consider the following figure illustrating how an auxiliary question is added to the question set and its answer removes one sub-question from the set of alternatives:

FIGURE 2:

Where is Frida?					
<i>Does Frida work on Thursdays?</i>					
Frida does not work on Thursdays					
Is Frida at work?		Is Frida at home?		Is Frida at the game?	
Frida is at work	Frida is not at work	Frida is at home	Frida is not at home	Frida is at the game	Frida is not at the game

Since interlocutors can introduce new questions in an ongoing inquiry of trying to resolve a QUD, the question set can form a stack of QUDs. The interlocutors are in general expected to follow a *last-in-first-out norm* to try to resolve the QUD that was added most recently (Björkholm & Olsson Yaouzis, forthcoming). For instance, once the QUD of whether Frida works on Thursdays has been added to the stack of QUDs, this becomes the immediate QUD that the interlocutors will aim to resolve (or determine irresolvable).

With this clarification of how the question set is structured in place, I will argue that in cases of deep disagreement, the defects of the common ground and to-do list function affect the

ability to adopt strategies for resolving QUDs. Hence, the defects make it impossible for speakers to engage in a rational conversation and resolve their disagreement.

Consider again the disagreements over abortion and vaccines. In these cases, we can model the conversations between the speakers as revolving around the polar QUDs “Is abortion permissible?” and “Should one get vaccinated?”.⁶ Recall that speakers can either try to resolve the QUD by offering an answer to it or propose a strategy for resolving it. The first strategy is clearly unsuccessful in these cases, since they disagree about whether to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’. They cannot agree on a proposition among the set of alternatives which resolves this QUD and removes it from the question set. But, as I will now argue, neither can they successfully suggest a strategy for resolving the QUD by raising a sub-question or auxiliary question.

There are at least three problems that arise for the strategy of raising new QUDs as strategies to resolve a deep disagreement. First, many attempts at introducing auxiliary QUDs that the interlocutors of a deep disagreement might employ will be unsuccessful because they will disagree about the newly introduced QUD as well. For instance, consider again the case where the speakers disagree about the moral obligation of taking vaccines. In this case, the starting moral QUD is “Should one get the vaccine?”. The vaccine sceptic might then raise the auxiliary question “Are vaccines dangerous?”. The vaccine proponent might take this QUD as a relevant question – after all, they agree that it is on their to-do lists not to inject themselves with dangerous substances, even if it helps others. But they disagree about this too. Hence, the introduction of new QUD gets

⁶ This type of first-order moral disagreement is, of course, also a highly contested topic in metaethics and several metaethical views struggle to make sense of what it is that people disagree about when they have these sorts of disagreements. I set this discussion completely aside for the purposes of this paper. For helpful overviews, see (Tersman, 2016, 2022; Björnsson, 2017).

them nowhere. What happens in cases of deep disagreements is thus that the stack of QUDs just keeps growing, because they fail to resolve most of the QUDs they add.

Second, and relatedly, an interlocutor might raise a QUD that cannot be resolved because it presupposes something false from the perspective of the other interlocutor. Therefore, it lacks a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer according to one of the interlocutors. The problem is thus not that the interlocutors disagree about how to answer it, but rather that one of them does not think that there is a true answer to it at all. To illustrate, in the debate about the permissibility of abortion, one interlocutor might raise the question “Is the soul of the fetus of sacred value?” as an auxiliary QUD. But this QUD presupposes that there is such a thing as souls and that answering the question of whether the soul of the fetus is of sacred value is a relevant strategy. A speaker who advocates for the right to abortion might, however, take this to be false. If so, the QUD presupposes something that is not common ground. Therefore, the QUD cannot be resolved by either a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer from the perspective of a speaker who does not believe that there is such a thing as a soul.⁷ The problem is thus that by raising this as an auxiliary QUD, the abortion opponent makes a presupposition about what is common ground that is rejected by the other speaker. The strategy will thus fail because this QUD cannot be resolved.

Third, and lastly, an interlocutor might raise a new QUD that the interlocutors can resolve, but that fails to be auxiliary for resolving the original QUD because it relies on a presupposition that only one of the interlocutors accept. For instance, suppose that an interlocutor who thinks that people ought to get vaccinated raises a QUD such as ‘What do the majority of medical researchers

⁷ Note that a QUD that presupposes something false will lack a true answer regardless of whether one thinks that assertions that presuppose something false lack truth value or are false. For instance, the question “Is the king of France bald?” lacks a true answer either because both propositions that constitute ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers are either false or lack truth value.

recommend?’ as an auxiliary question to an overarching QUD about whether one ought to get vaccinated. The problem is that while the vaccine sceptic might accept the proposition that the majority of medical researchers recommend people taking a particular vaccine into the common ground as a response to this QUD, the resolution of this QUD does not help since the interlocutors do not presuppose the same epistemic norms.

Recall that epistemic norms (as well as other norms) can be represented as default properties on to-do lists. If the vaccine skeptic does not accept an epistemic norm according to which to-do lists by default include the property of adhering to the recommendations of researchers, the resolution of the QUD concerning what these experts recommend will get the interlocutors nowhere. This QUD is not auxiliary to solving the original QUD (e.g., ‘Should one get vaccinated?’) from the perspective of the vaccine sceptic. Hence, the interlocutors can successfully resolve the QUD about what the researchers recommend. But doing so is not a successful strategy for resolving the original QUD about whether one should take a vaccine since the QUD about what the experts recommend is auxiliary to resolving the original QUD only from the perspective of one of them. It is not an auxiliary QUD from the perspective of the vaccine sceptic, because the sceptic does not presuppose the relevant epistemic norm.

In short, because of the severely defective contexts in which interlocutors deeply disagree, there is no resolution strategy in sight. I have argued that when an interlocutor of a deep disagreement introduces new QUD as a resolution strategy, it might: (i) just lead to a growing stack of QUDs since the interlocutors fail to resolve the new QUD too, (ii) presuppose something that is not common ground and therefore lack a correct answer from the perspective of one of the interlocutors, and (iii) presuppose a norm by default on the interlocutors to-do lists that one

interlocutor does not accept, and thus be auxiliary to resolving the original QUD only from the perspective of one interlocutor.

To take stock, the core of the problem posed by deep disagreement is that the structure of conversation that the dynamic model elucidates conceives of conversation as a rational, goal-oriented, and cooperative endeavor. But in deep disagreements, the conditions for rational conversation are not met because their severely defective discourse structure precludes successful communication and conflict resolution. If such deep disagreements become widespread and prevalent, our prospects for achieving and sustaining moral progress seem dire since we are unable to engage in rational dialogue with our opponents. Before I conclude, I will briefly sketch a proposal for how to solve deep disagreements and achieve practical moral progress through conversational pretense.

4. Conversational Pretense

I have argued that if deep disagreements become widespread, they can constitute an obstacle for achieving or sustaining moral progress, and that further inquiry into the mechanisms that govern conversation in these cases does not provide optimism for the resolvability of deep disagreements. Rather, I argued that in deep disagreements, interlocutors fail to rationally communicate and explained why this is so. It is not just hard to see how the interlocutors might reach agreement; it is also difficult to see how they might rationally engage in conversation at all. Despite this pessimistic conclusion, I will now explore the prospects of finding a constructive application of the dynamic pragmatic model that might illuminate a path for resolving deep disagreements.

An important feature of the pragmatic framework adopted here is that content accepted in the discourse context need not correspond to the actual beliefs or intentions had by the

interlocutors. An interlocutor can accept a proposition into the common ground that they do not believe, a question in the question set that they have no interest in answering, or an action onto their to-do list that they do not aim to perform. To accept something in the discourse context is instead a matter of adopting a sociolinguistic disposition to behave in accordance with it in conversation. As Stalnaker puts it:

Presupposing is thus not a mental attitude like believing, but is rather a linguistic disposition—a disposition to behave in one's use of language as if one had certain beliefs, or were making certain assumptions [...] A proposition is presupposed if the speaker is disposed to act as if he assumes or believes that the proposition is true, and as if he assumes or believes that his audience assumes or believes that it is true as well (Stalnaker, 1999, pp. 52, 58).

Peet (2021) argues that the defects of a context might only be transparent to one or some of the participants of the conversation (and sometimes defects are opaque to all). A speaker might thus realize that there is a defect in the discourse context but choose not to make this defect apparent to their interlocutor. In some cases, a speaker might accept something into the discourse context to purposefully mislead their addressee. But they might also do so for the sake of conversation, perhaps because they cannot be bothered to object to it, or to explore the implications of a commitment or argument.

In light of these considerations, the dynamic pragmatic model allows one of the interlocutors of a deep disagreement to accept parts of the others' worldview for the sake of conversation. This would amount to accepting some information into the discourse that they do

not actually endorse – thus going along with some of the norms and beliefs of their interlocutor – and thereby accessing ways of resolving the disagreement over the first-order moral issue that they want to convince their opponent of. By doing so, the interlocutor can try to resolve the disagreement from the perspective of their opponent by pretending that they have more in common than they do. This is what I call the strategy of *conversational pretense*.

In cases of deep moral disagreement, an interlocutor might adopt just enough of the norms and beliefs of their opponent to ensure that the discourse context is no longer severely defective. By doing so, they might be able to access strategies for solving the disagreement that were not previously available and resolve the first order moral QUDs about abortion, climate change, affirmative action, or vaccines. The interlocutor would thus convince their opponent of a conclusion that they sincerely think is correct, but by means of accepting some premises (values, beliefs, or other commitments) that they think are mistaken or unjustified.

I will briefly discuss three worries about this strategy. The first worry is that the strategy of conversational pretense is too narrow and particular in its focus, because it targets individual beliefs within a whole system of objectionable commitments. A belief about abortion, for instance, might be bound up with a whole set of beliefs, preferences, and norms that are objectionable according to one interlocutor but not the other – such as anti-feminist views about the opportunities that women ought to have in society. It is therefore not enough to convert the interlocutor who accepts all of this to give up *one* of their moral beliefs within this system. Thus, to reach the kind of agreement we want for moral progress, we need a way to change the whole system of attitudes, not just an individual belief within it.

A second worry is that reaching agreement through conversational pretense might be morally impermissible. For instance, one might argue that one *disrespects* the opponent by

deceiving them or that one treats them as a *mere means* for the ultimate end of moral progress. It would therefore be wrong and should not be considered a fruitful way to tackle deep disagreements.

In response to this moral worry, one might argue that conversational pretense need not be invoked as a manipulative strategy, but rather as a way of getting one's interlocutor to see how their underlying commitments can be compatible with unexpected conclusions. To see how, consider a related suggestion from psychological research on science communication. Hornsey and Fielding (2017) argue that a researcher can invoke "jiu jitsu persuasion"⁸ to change people's resistance to science. Very roughly, this amounts to identifying the opponent's underlying values or motivations and shape one's arguments in ways that are congenial to them (Hornsey and Fielding, 2017, p. 469). Similarly, conversational pretense can be invoked as a benevolent strategy of making one's interlocutor see that the underlying values or commitment that they accept need not lead to the conclusion that they have reached.

However, a third and final worry concerns the practical problem that conversational pretense might be possible only in circumstances when disagreement is not deep. For conversational pretense to be at all possible, the interlocutor must have a certain level of understanding of their opponent's way of viewing the world. But this level of understanding will not be accessible in cases of deep disagreement. Hence, an interlocutor might be unable to accept, even just for the sake of conversation, a worldview which they do not understand.⁹

⁸ The martial arts metaphor comes from the strategy of "coaching people to use the opponent's force against them, rather than trying to defeat it head-on" (Hornsey and Fielding, 2017, p. 468).

⁹ Another practical problem is that although deep disagreements are not by definition peer disagreements, there might be instances of deep disagreements that occur among peers. In such cases, conversational pretense might not be possible since the peers already have access to the same information.

A similar worry is raised by Godden (2019) in critiquing of Finocchiaro's (2013) view that deep disagreements can be resolved through *meta-argumentation*, which (very roughly) can be characterized as "arguments about one or more arguments, or about argumentation in general" (2013, p. 1). Godden argues that meta-argumentation will be successful for resolving disagreements only in situations where the disagreement is not deep to begin with (2019, p. 742). The reason is that successful meta-argumentation require the kind of shared competence and understanding that interlocutors of a deep disagreement lack (Godden, 2019, p. 744). A similar worry is also raised by Hornsby and Fielding about their own proposal. They conclude that science communicator who adopts the jiu jitsu model of persuasion is therefore faced with a "tremendous communication challenge" (2017, p. 470).

To take stock, the strategy of conversational pretense faces moral, practical and strategic challenges. What I have offered here is just an initial sketch of the strategy as a response to the problem that the interlocutors in a deep disagreement fail to rationally communicate and that widespread disagreement can therefore constitute an obstacle for achieving and sustaining moral progress. However, more would need to be said in defense of this strategy or in its favor of its demise.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that further inquiry into the structure of conversation reveals the magnitude of the problem of resolving deep disagreements, because they occur in severely defective discourse contexts. In short, I argued that in cases of deep disagreement, the interlocutors fail to rationally communicate because the defective discourse context blocks them from accessing resolution strategies. I have argued that widespread deep moral disagreements can therefore constitute an

obstacle for achieving or sustaining moral progress since the interlocutors of a deep disagreement fail to rationally communicate. Finally, I introduced and critically assessed the proposal that deep disagreement might be resolvable through adopting a strategy of conversational pretense. In such cases, one interlocutor would go along with some of the presuppositions of their opponent to convince them of their preferred side of the first-order disagreement that they started out with.

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