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Common Ground and Modal Disagreement

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ABSTRACT: The common ground in an inquiry consists of what the participants agree on, at least for the sake of the inquiry. The relations between the factual and linguistic components of common ground are notoriously difficult to trace. I clarify them by exploring how modal disagreements – disagreements about how things might be – interact with the linguistic and the factual common ground. I argue that modal agreement is essential to common ground of any kind.

KEY WORDS: common ground, possible worlds, semantics

I will begin my discussion of common ground and modal disagreement with an illustration of the complex interactions between beliefs about meaning and beliefs about the facts. Andy, Bob and Charles are discussing American politics, when Andy says, 'Cheney is a vet. He served in Vietnam.' Bob and Charles dispute this, both saying 'What? Cheney is not a vet.' But while Andy and Bob mean *veteran* by 'vet', Charles means *veterinarian*. We know how to describe these disagreements, and even what it takes to resolve them. Andy and Bob agree on the meaning of 'Cheney is a vet', but disagree about the facts while Andy and Charles disagree about the meaning of that sentence, but may otherwise agree on the facts. But now along comes Donald who says 'Cheney might have served in Vietnam, but he is not a vet.' Donald believes, as he would put it, that only women can be veterans. As he sees it, it is impossible, and not just false, that Cheney should be a veteran. Superficially, this disagreement looks just like the one between Andy and Charles. But I will argue that this disagreement, like all modal disagreements, cannot be resolved rationally because the common linguistic ground needed to resolve it rationally cannot be found.

I will start by saying some familiar things about common ground, but I will do it within a framework of possible worlds, which might not be so familiar. I find this abstract framework helpful for thinking about the notion of the common ground in an inquiry and for helping to describe the ways in which linguistic and non-linguistic disagreements interact. I will use it show that resolving factual disagreements requires linguistic agreement on meaning and that resolving linguistic disagreements requires modal agreement. We will then be in a position to see why disagreements about what is possible cannot rationally be resolved. (My discussion of common ground relies on the discussions in (Stalnaker 1974), (Lewis 1979) and (Stalnaker 2002).)

The common ground in an inquiry is what all sides agree to agree on, what they are *presupposing*, for the sake of the inquiry. Something does not need to be believed by the participants for it to be common ground; it need only be accepted for the purposes at hand. I might agree for the sake of an argument that Cheney is a patriot and this would

make his being a patriot part of the common ground, even though I might continue to believe that he is not really patriotic. So long as we all agree to agree on it, then it is part of the common ground. This agreement need not be explicit; much of the common ground in an inquiry will be stuff that all sides simply take for granted is taken for granted.

The common ground in an inquiry involves a kind of mutual agreement on the facts, on what is the case. This means that the common ground determines a set of truth conditions: the way things would have to be for them to be as those in the inquiry are agreeing to take them to be. We can think of the truth conditions determined by the common ground as a set of possible worlds: it is the set of possible worlds where things are as they are presupposed to be. This set also represents the questions that remain open in a discussion and it can help us to describe and understand the interactions between factual, linguistic and modal disagreements.

But before I get to that, let me say a bit about the notion of a possible world. For my purposes, talk about possible worlds is just fancy talk about how things might be or might have been. To say that there is a possible world where Dick Cheney is a veterinarian is just a fancy way of saying that Dick Cheney might have been a veterinarian. We should think of a possible world as a maximally complete way that things might have been or might be; sort of like an alternate universe with a complete history. Possible worlds are distinct one from another when something is true of one but not the other. I find the notion of a possible world to be very useful for describing and raising questions about the phenomena of common ground. I think that it enables insights that are otherwise hard to obtain. But the notion will not be doing any substantive theoretical work in what follows.

I said that the common ground in a discussion can be represented by a set of possible worlds. (The set is sometimes called the "context set.") The worlds in that set will be similar in some respects and different in others. The similarities represent the common ground, what all the participants agree to, what they are presupposing in the inquiry. The differences among the worlds in the set represent the open questions, the possibilities they have not yet decided on. If all of the worlds are ones where Dick Cheney is a Republican, then his being a Republican is common ground; if he is a Republican in some but not others, then it is an open question whether he is. The participants agree (if only for the sake of the inquiry) that the actual world is one of the worlds in the set, but it is an open question just which world it is. As the inquiry proceeds and open questions are answered, the set of possible worlds is whittled down. Ideally, inquiry ends only when there is but one world remaining.

When the participants use linguistic resources to pursue the inquiry, the common ground will include some *linguistic* common ground. The participants will agree on how to use some of their shared linguistic resources to state what they are presupposing and to describe the possibilities that remain open. The common ground includes not just agreement on which objects have which properties, but also agreement on how to use their words to say which objects have or might have which properties. We can represent this feature of the common ground using the set of possible worlds, but it will be helpful to make a simplifying assumption. It is well known that our use of language is context-dependent, and that sentences can be used to say different things, to express different sets of truth conditions on different uses. Consequently, there is debate among theorists over

what semantic properties sentences have. Some deny that sentences are true or false, insisting that it is what speakers say with sentences that is true or false. This debate is familiar, but irrelevant for my purposes here. I will simply assume that agreeing on the meaning of a sentence involves agreeing on its truth conditions, on how things would have to be for that sentence to be true.

Given the simplifying assumption that sentences are true or false, it follows that sentences determine truth conditions, and we can represent a sentence's truth conditions using possible worlds. For instance, the sentence 'Cheney is a vet' is true with respect to some worlds and false (or at least not true) with respect to others. Its meaning draws a division or a distinction among possible worlds, between those with respect to which it is true and those with respect to which it is false. We can think of agreement on the meaning of a sentence as agreement on what division its meaning draws among those possible worlds. A disagreement over that division is sufficient for disagreement over its meaning.

Suppose that it is common ground in a discussion that the sentence 'Cheney is VP' is true just in case Cheney is VP. In that case, every world in the set is one where that sentence draws the very same distinction among the worlds in that set. The participants may not agree over which of the worlds in the set is the actual one, but they do agree that whichever world is actual, it is one where that sentence draws that distinction in the set. Suppose further that it is an open question in that inquiry whether Cheney is in fact VP. In that case, some of the worlds in the set are ones where he is VP, and so where that sentence is true, while the rest are ones where he is not VP and so where that sentence is false.

I have been describing how the common ground in an inquiry can be represented by a set of possible worlds, and have extended this to the common linguistic ground. The common ground is represented by what all the worlds in that set have in common. The open questions in the inquiry are represented by the differences among those worlds. The open questions might include factual ones. It might be an open question whether Cheney has violated his oath of office. But the open questions might also include linguistic ones. It might be an open question among them what a certain word means, or how it is to be used, or what division among the worlds a given sentence draws. Their goal as inquiry proceeds is to narrow down the remaining factual and linguistic possibilities until only one is left.

Let me make one last point about the abstract structure of common ground. It is a factual matter what the common ground is in a given discussion. This means that it is possible for participants in an inquiry to be mistaken about what the common ground is. A participant might think something is being presupposed when in fact it is not. The mistake may concern what is presupposed about the facts, about whether Cheney is patriotic, say, or it might concern what is presupposed about how to say what those facts might be, about what the word 'Cheney' or 'vet' means.

Now that I have described how to think about common ground within the possible worlds framework, I want to use that framework to help us distinguish and understand the three kinds of disagreements in my introductory story. The disagreement between Andy and Bob is the most straightforward. They agree about what the sentence 'Cheney is a vet' means but disagree over whether it is true. In terms of the abstract framework of possible worlds, Andy and Bob agree on what division that sentence draws among the

possibilities, but they disagree over which side of that division the actual world is on. In every world in the set that represents their common ground, that sentence is true just in case Cheney is a veteran, but in some of those worlds he is a veteran and the sentence is true while in others he is not and the sentence is false. To resolve their disagreement, they need to do further work to decide that open factual question.

The disagreement between Andy and Charles is more complex and illustrates the point that resolving factual disagreements requires linguistic common ground. It is a more complex disagreement since it involves a mistake about the common ground. More specifically, it involves a mistake about the linguistic common ground. Andy thinks that the sentence 'Cheney is a vet' is true just in case Cheney is a *veteran*, but Charles thinks that it is true just in case Cheney is a *veterinarian*. They disagree over what division that sentence draws among possible worlds. Moreover, each side thinks that its view of that sentence's meaning is common ground. Andy thinks that every world in the common ground is one where it is true just in case Cheney is a veteran whereas Charles thinks that every world in that set is one where it is true just in case Cheney is a veterinarian. This difference over the common ground is a recipe for investigative frustration for it makes a merely terminological disagreement look like a substantive factual one. Despite their apparent disagreement, Charles might well agree with Andy that Cheney is a veteran and not a veterinarian. They might agree on the facts even though they disagree over how to state them. Until they come to agree on how their words draw a distinction among the possibilities, they will find it impossible to agree on what the facts are.

The difficulty that Andy and Charles face illustrates why the meanings of our words must in a certain way be *independent* of the facts. If the meanings of our words depend on the facts, then we cannot know what our sentences mean until we know whether they are true. But we cannot know whether they are true until we know what they mean. We can put this difficulty in terms of possible worlds. If the meaning of a sentence varies from one world to another in the common ground, then we cannot agree on whether it is true until we agree on which world in the common ground is the actual world. But how can we agree on which world we are in unless we first agree on how to *describe* the worlds we might be in? To agree on which world is the actual world we must first agree on how to distinguish one world from another.

I have suggested that meaning must be independent of the facts. Of course, the meanings of our words are not really independent of the facts. It is after all a contingent matter that our words mean what they do. But we can avoid the difficulty that Andy and Charles face so long as the words we are using mean the same thing in every world in the set that represents our common ground. So long as what our words mean is not among the open questions, so long as the meaning of our words is independent of the facts that remain to be settled on, then we will avoid their difficulty.

Andy and Charles can resolve their disagreement if they agree on what is possible. Suppose that Charles agrees with Andy about which of the worlds in the set are ones where Cheney is a veteran and which are ones where Cheney is a veterinarian. Their disagreement would then be a purely linguistic one: it would concern which division that sentence draws among the possible worlds left open by their common ground. Once they identify this linguistic disagreement, they can recover common ground by recognizing that it is an open question among them what that sentence means. From Andy's perspective, recognizing this means adding to the set of worlds ones where Charles is

right about the language; from Charles' perspective it means adding worlds where Andy is right about the language. They can then agree on the following conditional: if Andy is right about the linguistic facts, then that sentence is true just in case the actual world is one where Cheney is a veteran, but if Charles is right about the linguistic facts, then that sentence is true just in case the actual world is one where Cheney is a veterinarian. By making explicit their linguistic disagreement, they can find the common ground needed to state their factual agreement.

The disagreement between Andy and Charles illustrates the important point that resolving disagreements about the facts requires agreement on meaning. The disagreement between Andy and Donald which I will now consider illustrates a second and more important point: resolving disagreements about meaning requires agreement on what is possible. Once we see this, we will be in a position to see why modal disagreements cannot be resolved rationally.

Let me first argue for this second point at an abstract level. Agreeing on the meaning of a sentence requires agreeing on which division it draws among a set of possible worlds. But if you and I disagree about which worlds are possible, then we will disagree about what divisions there are to be drawn among those worlds. If we disagree about what divisions there are to be drawn, then there will be some pair of sentences such that one of us thinks they draw the same distinction and the other of us thinks they draw a different one. Thus, if we disagree about what is possible, then we must also disagree about what our words mean, about what they are used to say. But there is more to it. If we disagree about what is possible, then we must also disagree about *what there is to say*, and not just about how to say it; we must disagree about which distinctions there are to *be drawn*, and not just about how to draw them.

This kind of disagreement is illustrated in the dispute between Andy and Donald. At first glance, it seems that Donald agrees with *both* Andy *and* Bob. He seems to agree with Andy that Cheney served in Vietnam, and with Bob that Cheney is not a veteran. But there is more to the disagreement. Unlike Andy and Bob, who thinks it is merely contingent that Cheney is no veteran, Donald thinks that it is impossible for him to have been a veteran, since, as he would put it, only women can be veterans and Cheney could not have been a woman. This is a disagreement not just about how things are, and not just about how to describe how they are, but about how things might be or might have been. It is a modal disagreement.

Like the disagreement between Andy and Charles, the one between Andy and Donald involves a mistake about the common ground. We saw that Andy and Charles could recover common ground by making it an open question what it was that Andy said. In effect, this adds to the common ground worlds where the linguistic facts are different. This retreat to secure common ground allows them to state their linguistic disagreement. But Andy and Donald cannot recover common ground by making it an open question what the modal facts are, for there is no such thing as adding to the set of worlds ones where the modal facts are different in the way we Andy and Bob could add a world where the linguistic facts are different. Worlds do not differ one from another in their modal facts. Modal facts are not facts about a world at all; they are facts about the relations among worlds. To say that something is possible is to say something about the set of worlds, not about any world in the set. There is no way for Andy and Donald to retreat to secure common ground by adding to the set a world where the modal facts are different.

To see this in another way, consider what sort of world would have to be added. It could not just be a world where Cheney served in Vietnam. The set already contains such worlds and Andy and Donald agree on this and may even agree about which ones they are. What about a world where Cheney served in Vietnam but is not a veteran? This won't do either. For Andy thinks there are no such worlds, so he cannot agree to add one, any more than he could agree to add a world where Cheney is a zebra. (Andy agreed to add a world where the linguistic facts are the way Charles takes them to be because Andy agrees that such worlds are possible, since we might have spoken that way.) What is more, Donald thinks that the set *already* contains a world where Cheney served in Vietnam but is not a veteran, so he cannot agree that one needs to be added. Andy sees no way to change the set; Donald sees no need to change it.

I have been discussing Andy and Donald's modal disagreement. It is also true that they disagree about the linguistic facts. They disagree about which division the sentence 'Cheney is a veteran' draws among the possible worlds in the set. Could they reach a conditional *linguistic* agreement, the way Andy and Charles did? Could they agree on this: if the linguistic facts are the way Andy takes them to be, then what Andy said is true of those worlds where Cheney served in Vietnam (and perhaps others), but if the linguistic facts are the way Donald takes them to be, then what Andy said is false with respect to those worlds? No. For it is not just that they disagree about which division that sentence draws among the worlds in the set; they disagree about which divisions there are to be drawn among the worlds in the set. While Andy and Charles agreed on what there is to say, but disagreed about how to say it, Andy and Donald disagree about what there is to say.

Because their disagreement is over what there is to say, and not just over how to say it, it is not possible for them to agree on how to state their disagreement. It seems to me that under these conditions there is no way to resolve their disagreement rationally. I am not sure how to argue for this, but it seems to me that it is impossible to resolve a debate rationally unless there is enough common ground for each side in the dispute to state their case. To resolve a disagreement rationally, we have to be able to agree on what we disagree on. But this is not possible in the dispute between Andy and Donald, since Donald sees Andy as trying to draw a distinction he denies exists. The dispute between Andy and Donald illustrates that modal disagreement leaves linguistic common ground out of reach, and without linguistic common ground there can be no way to agree on what the disagreement is about.

Earlier, we saw that meaning must in a way be independent of truth, since otherwise we could not know what our sentences mean without knowing whether they are true. There is an analogous moral here: what there is to say must be independent of the facts too. If what there is to say depends on the facts, then we could not know whether we were saying something without knowing whether we were saying something true. If what distinctions there are to be drawn varies from one world to another in the set that represents our common ground, then we cannot know whether we are speaking nonsense until we know which world we are in. But how can we agree on which world we are in if we cannot first agree on when we are speaking nonsense? This is the difficulty facing Andy and Donald and anyone else engaged in a modal disagreement.

I have claimed that modal disagreements cannot be resolved rationally. But they can come to an end. They end when one side gives in to the other. Perhaps Donald will

simply acquiesce to Andy. This may *look* like acquiescing to his linguistic usage, as if the disagreement was really just a linguistic one after all. But it is not like the case where Charles changed his mind on the linguistic facts, and acquiesced to Andy's usage. For Charles changed his mind on how to say things, but not on what there is to be said. If Donald acquiesces to Andy, then, from his point of view, he will be changing his mind on how to say things, but only because he is also from his point of view changing his mind on what there is to say. (We, by the way, are in the same position as Andy: we think that there are more things to say than Donald does. Consequently, we cannot use our words to accurately report what he thinks he is saying.)

In arguing that modal disagreements cannot be resolved rationally, I have been relying on the notion of a possible world and I have represented common ground and meaning using sets of possible worlds. But nothing in what I have said hangs on this. Talk of possible worlds and sets of them is helpful for thinking about three basic theses each of which can be stated independently of the framework of possible worlds. One is that the common ground in a discussion determines truth conditions; the second is that the meaning of a sentence determines truth conditions; the third is that agreeing on the truth conditions of a sentence requires agreeing on what is possible. The point I have been trying to make is that accepting these three basic theses, which I think most everyone does, commits one to the somewhat surprising consequence that modal disagreements cannot be resolved rationally. The framework of possible worlds merely helps to make this commitment clear.

link to commentary

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