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G C. Goddu

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Commentary on D. Hunter: “Common Ground and Modal Disagreement”

G.C. GODDU

*Department of Philosophy
University of Richmond
28 Westhampton Way
University of Richmond, VA 23173
USA
ggoddu@richmond.edu*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to David Hunter, all modal disagreements cannot be resolved rationally. Why not? Because “the common linguistic ground needed to resolve modal disagreements rationally cannot be found.” (p. 1) Much of Hunter’s paper is devoted to trying to make clear why the common linguistic ground cannot be found. I shall argue, however, that he does not, and in fact, cannot succeed.

2. MODAL DISAGREEMENT AND COMMON GROUND

I disagree that all modal disagreements cannot be resolved rationally. I shall argue below that at least some modal disagreements can be rationally resolved. But first I shall argue that there is necessarily something wrong with Hunter’s argument. Suppose I am right and Hunter is wrong that all modal disagreements cannot be rationally resolved. If his conclusion is false, then something is wrong with his argument. Now suppose Hunter is right and no modal disagreement *can* be rationally resolved. But I am a sceptic and think some modal disagreements *can* be rationally resolved. So Hunter and I disagree “about how things might be or might have been” (p. 6), i.e., we are engaged in a modal disagreement. Hence, if he is right, this very disagreement cannot be rationally resolved. But then, assuming that his argument is meant to be a means of rationally convincing me (or anyone) that no modal disagreement can be rationally resolved, something must be wrong with his argument. For if his argument were capable of successfully rationally convincing me (or any sceptic) of the truth of his claim, then a modal disagreement would be rationally resolved, in which case his claim would be false. Hence, his argument cannot be capable of rationally convincing me (or any sceptic) of the truth of his claim, and so something must be wrong with it. Either Hunter is right or wrong—but either way something is wrong with his argument. Hence, something is *necessarily* wrong with his argument.

So what is wrong with his argument? For starters, as I hinted above, the conclusion is false. Here are three counterexamples:

- A. Edgar and Flo are investigating the assassination of a high-ranking diplomat. Flo argues, “You cannot be serious that the sniper shot from here—no one could have

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made that shot! It is just not possible.” Edgar responds by using the same type of rifle as retrieved from a nearby garbage can to make a similar shot. Flo concedes it is possible this is the spot since it is possible for someone to have made the shot from this spot.

- B. George looks at the board position of the chess game Edgar and Flo are playing and says: “That board position is impossible.” Edgar and Flo are both sceptical. “We got here, so it is not even possible that the board position is impossible.” But review of the moves prior to this position reveals that at one point, unbeknownst to both Edgar and Flo, Edgar moved his king into check. Hence, Edgar and Flo concede that it is at least possible that the board position is impossible. Further, though the demonstration is much more complicated, we can even suppose that George is right that the current board position could not have been arrived at by any legal combination of moves. Edgar and Flo concede that the board position is impossible.
- C. Edgar and Flo both agree that changing the past is physically impossible, but Edgar, unlike Flo, maintains it is logically possible. Flo, however, demonstrates to Edgar’s satisfaction that changing the past entails a contradiction and so Edgar concedes that changing the past is logically impossible.

These are examples of disputes about what might or might not be or have been. So, unless none is an example of a rational resolution, then the claim that no modal disagreement can be rationally resolved is false and something is wrong with Hunter’s argument.

Given that, according to Hunter, accepting his “three basic theses ... commits one to the somewhat surprising consequence that modal disagreements cannot be resolved rationally” (p. 7-8) and that the consequence is false, then something else must also be wrong with his argument. At the very least, either Hunter is wrong that his three basic theses commit us to his conclusion, or at least one of his three basic theses (or some other premise of his argument) must be false. Indeed, specifying further what is wrong with Hunter’s argument is a challenge, since Hunter’s elaboration of ‘common ground’, ‘same meaning’, ‘rational resolution’, etc., are still quite vague. Regardless, I offer one possibility for what is wrong with Hunter’s argument.

Hunter’s notion of common ground is inadequate for the task at hand. According to Hunter, “the common ground in a discussion can be represented by a set of possible worlds”—“the set of possible worlds where things are as they are presupposed to be.” (p. 2) Hunter also holds that “worlds do not differ from one another in their modal facts. Modal facts are not facts about a world at all; they are facts about the relations among worlds.” (p. 6) But the consequence is that representing common ground in terms of a set of possible worlds cannot capture modal common ground or modal disagreement. There is no way to even represent, in terms of what is true at particular worlds, that Edgar and Flo agree that time travel is logically possible and the changing the past is physically impossible, but disagree that that changing the past is logically impossible. But if the framework cannot even model the phenomenon we are trying to understand, then any conclusions about the phenomenon reached on the basis of that framework are suspect.

There is, however, a way to make modal facts facts about worlds. For example, to say that it is physically impossible to change the past in this world, is just to say that there

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is no accessible world in which the past changes. In this context, an accessible world is one that has the same physical laws as this one. To say it is logically possible would be to say that there is a logically accessible world in which it changes. If Edgar and Flo agree that it is physically impossible to change the past, then all the worlds in the common ground set are worlds such that no accessible world allows for changing the past. If it is common ground that changing the past is physically possible, then all the worlds in the common ground are such that some accessible world allows for changing the past.

Even granting this way of making modal facts about particular worlds, can we adequately model modal disagreement? Open questions, according to Hunter, are supposed to be represented by differences among the worlds in the common ground set. (p. 3) We cannot, however, just say that if Edgar and Flo disagree over the physical possibility of changing the past, then some worlds in the common ground see worlds in which changing the past occurs and some worlds do not. Suppose Edgar and Flo agree on the physical laws and the physical laws, in fact, exclude the possibility of changing the past. Then there are no worlds in the common ground set that see worlds in which changing the past occurs. How then to adequately represent Edgar's and Flo's disagreement?

In fact, this problem of representing open questions in an inquiry is not limited to modal disagreements. Al and Bob may agree on facts that exclude the possibility that Cheney served in Vietnam, but be unaware that these facts exclude the possibility. Hence, they may agree on the facts, but disagree on whether Cheney served in Vietnam. But then it is not an open question, given their common ground, whether Cheney served in Vietnam or not. Al and Charles may agree on enough facts and linguistic facts that exclude the possibility that 'Cheney is a vet' means the same as 'Cheney is a veterinarian', but be unaware that the facts exclude this possibility. Hence, their common ground will be such that Al is right that Cheney is a veteran (and that 'Cheney is a vet' means the same as 'Cheney is a veteran') but they still disagree about whether or not Cheney is a vet. Note that Hunter's proposed resolution in his actual Al and Charles case will not resolve the problem here. Suppose Al accepts that Charles' way of speaking could be right, but does not retract any of the other common ground. But given that the other common ground that Al and Charles accept in fact excludes the possibility of Charles' way of talking being correct, the result will be *no* possible worlds in the common ground even though both Al and Charles think the common ground is non-empty.

3. CONCLUSION

The current framework of representing dispute resolution in terms of narrowing down the set of common ground worlds to a set where the relevant open question has been resolved is not an adequate framework for modeling all sorts of disagreements, let alone modal disagreements. But then Hunter has yet to show that modal disagreements cannot be rationally resolved. Indeed, given the very claim itself, we should doubt that it *can* be rationally shown to be true.

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