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# Deep Disagreements and Some Resolution Strategies That Simply Won't Do

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**Abstract:** A deep disagreement is the result of clashing systems of underlying principles. Debate surrounding the possibility of the resolution of deep disagreements is ongoing. I elucidate the notion of deep disagreements by assuming their resolution is not precluded. I consider five disagreement resolution strategies offered by Steven Hales. Though I conclude that these strategies are not viable for resolving a deep disagreement, my examination allows me to identify certain key marks of an adequate solution.

**Keywords:** deep disagreement, conceptual framework, framework principles, Fogelin, rational resolution, resolution strategies, underlying principles

## 1. Introduction

In his 1985 “The Logic of Deep Disagreements” Robert Fogelin presents the idea of a deep disagreement as a disagreement over which a clash of “underlying principles”(Fogelin, p. 5)<sup>1</sup> precludes the conditions for rational resolution. There is ongoing discussion surrounding whether deep disagreements are to be understood as absolutely unresolvable by definition.<sup>2</sup> I make no attempt to settle this discussion in this paper. Instead, I attempt to provide the reader with a better understanding of deep disagreements by assuming that their resolution is not analytically precluded and identifying certain necessary marks of said resolution. I draw out the distinction between deep disagreements and normal disagreements in light of five strategies for rational disagreement resolution put forward by Steven Hales in his 2014 “Motivations for Relativism as a Solution to Disagreements.” I explain why none of these strategies (including, in opposition to Hales, relativism) offers a viable strategy for the resolution of deep disagreements. While I do not provide any alternative strategy for the resolution of deep disagreements, my examination allows me to identify some conditions that any adequate solution to deep disagreements would need to satisfy.

## 2. Deep Disagreements

Before considering the viability of adopting various disagreement strategies when faced with a deep disagreement, I will elucidate the notion of deep disagreement itself by turning to Fogelin’s description and some current writers on the subject. Deep disagreements are to be understood as disagreements over which there can be no rational resolution – not because the speakers are

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<sup>1</sup> “Now when I speak about underlying principles, I am thinking about what others (Putnam) have called framework propositions or what Wittgenstein was inclined to call rules. We get a deep disagreement when the argument is generated by a clash of framework propositions” (Fogelin, p. 5).

<sup>2</sup> Included in this ongoing discussion are several works cited in this paper, such as those from Barris, Hales, and Lavorerio.

irrational, but because of a clash of “underlying principles” which has the result of precluding the conditions for rational resolution.

Fogelin gives us two examples of deep disagreements, the abortion debate and the debate surrounding affirmative action. Debates/discussions over these and similar disagreements, which have to do with what Fogelin calls one’s “moral standing” (Fogelin, p. 7), are often entirely fruitless, to the point where either interlocutor might conclude that the other is being unreasonable, uncooperative or simply pigheaded. The idea of deep disagreements lends itself to a more charitable understanding of one’s interlocutor. In a deep disagreement, we are faced with disagreements over “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, p. 6). Coming to understand disagreements over abortion, affirmative action, and other similarly heated topics as disagreements which emerge from a clashing of *systems* of beliefs can help account for the frustration one might associate with arguments about abortion (and other topics) without pushing us to deem the other party unreasonable.

Jeremy Barris describes how, in a deep disagreement, the interlocutors will often fail to recognize that the other is operating with a competing framework which includes radically different meanings for terms which appear in either framework.

[In a deep disagreement] each [system of beliefs] is unintelligible to the other, and the sense they typically do appear to each other to have is instead necessarily a misconstrual resulting from assimilating the other’s statements to the inapplicable criteria of the home framework (Barris, p. 370).

The misconstrual that Barris mentions is the source of the often-frustrating character of deep disagreements. By taking for granted that one’s interlocutor understands a proposition in the same way (or against the same background of beliefs) when discussing, for example, the nuances of morality, one stacks the deck in favour of confusion and befuddlement.

As to the source of the disparity between conceptual frameworks, in his 2018 “On the Pragmatics of Deep Disagreements,” Matthew Shields makes the case that deep disagreements emerge out of an accumulation of divergent *concepts* that recur throughout what Fogelin calls one’s system of underlying principles:

I want to suggest that we are well-served by construing deep disagreements as disagreements over how to understand concepts because this approach gives us a clear diagnosis for why our reasons appear to run out when faced with such disagreements (Shields, §1.2).

So, in the case of the abortion debate, the idea is that the disagreement might turn upon a network of deep-seated beliefs related to the idea of *personhood*. In the case of the affirmative action debate, the disagreement might turn upon a network of similarly deep-seated beliefs related to one’s conception of *fairness* (Fogelin, pp. 6-7).

For those who believe in a supernatural conception of the spirit, or soul, bringing any kind of biological arguments into the abortion debate might seem completely out of place, and the biologist might be equally perplexed with supernatural explanations. Of course, this example might be a bit misleading, because there is a very significant methodological asymmetry between biological and supernatural claims. It is important to note that clashes of framework principles,

which are the essential feature of deep disagreements, are not necessarily marked by this asymmetry. To that end, I'd like to note that deep disagreements have elsewhere been likened to a clash of Kuhnian paradigms (Shields, §1.2), so the idea of a wholly scientific deep disagreements (or deep disagreement between scientists) is very much on the table.

One key feature of normal disagreements which is not present in the case of deep disagreements is that the interlocutors are able to “agree on the method for resolving their disagreement”(Fogelin, p. 3). I will interpret Fogelin’s use of the word “method” here broadly enough to mean any sort of agreement on the sorts of things that would count as proof one way or the other. Deep disagreements are cases where what would count as a means of arriving at a resolution can’t be agreed upon. Fogelin puts it by saying that a deep disagreement is not to be understood as a case where there is no solution available, or possible. Instead “it is the stronger claim that the *conditions* for argument do not exist” (Fogelin, p. 5).

Scott Aikin picks up on this feature in his 2018 “Deep Disagreement and the Problem of the Criterion.” Aikin describes deep disagreements with reference to Sextus’s famous problem, wherein two interlocutors are faced with a regress of justifications for their reasons. Aikin writes

In the same way that the problem of the criterion has mutually-cancelling necessary conditions, so does the argumentative problem of deep disagreement.

(1) S has resolved a disagreement (about the acceptability of P) with H only if S has provided dialectically satisfying arguments for H that P.

(2) S has provided dialectically satisfying arguments for H that P only if S has resolved a disagreement with H (about the acceptability of C, as a criterion for the acceptable resolution of P) (Aikin, §3).

This feature of deep disagreements is accounted for by Shields’ pragmatic reading of deep disagreements. Indeed, the above quotation from Shields continues

There is a close link between normative reasons—reasons in favor of holding a belief or carrying out an action—and the concepts we have. One can only have a normative reason to  $\Phi$  or a normative reason to believe p if one also has the relevant concepts implicated in the act of  $\Phi$ -ing or in the proposition p (Shields, §1.2).

One could provide many examples which demonstrate this key point, but I think one will suffice. If I understand the word ‘left’ to have the exact same sense that most people attribute to the word ‘right,’ then not only will I consistently offer very poor directions to tourists, but I will come to believe that other people do not know how to give directions.

Now that we are equipped with a basic understanding of deep disagreements as disagreements which arise a clash of framework principles, it will be helpful to contrast them with the normal disagreements with which the reader is doubtlessly more familiar.

### **3. Some Resolution Strategies that Simply Won’t Do**

I will now turn my attention to distinguishing deep disagreements from normal disagreements by looking at five disagreement resolution strategies considered by Steven Hales and explaining why they fail as a resolution strategy for a deep disagreement. To be sure, Hales nowhere claims that his list is an exhaustive list of possible resolution strategies. Still, I think that this list is instructive when trying to better understand deep disagreements because each of the strategies Hales considers

can be broadly understood as being *rational* disagreement resolution strategies and deep disagreements are understood as disagreements over which there can be no rational resolution. So we will not here consider things like enforcement by an authority or the earth exploding -- which could very well end the debate! As a result of this examination, I will identify three key conditions which any adequate resolution to a deep disagreement would need to satisfy.

The argument resolution strategies that will be considered are 1) arguing to the point of capitulation, 2) arriving at a compromise, 3) identifying an ambiguity, 4) adopting Pyrrhonian skepticism and 5) adopting relativism. I will argue that none of these strategies are viable resolution strategies for a deep disagreement. For his part, Hales advances the adoption of relativism in a deep disagreement and I will explain why I disagree.

### 3.1. Capitulation

Arguing to the points of capitulation occurs when two interlocutors keep arguing until one concedes that the other's position is correct. If we end up agreeing on the same truth-value for some proposition as a result of *argumentation* (rather than, I think, exhaustion, hunger or torture), then we have argued to the point of capitulation (Hales, p. 64). I think it is fair to make the claim that people often take this to be the default method of disagreement resolution in normal disagreements.

Attempting to argue to the point of capitulation cannot be advised in the case of a deep disagreement. So much so, in fact, that one might be inclined to define deep disagreements as disagreements which cannot be settled by argument. But such a definition of deep disagreements would be inadequate, for while it would be accurate in so far as it could be universally applied to deep disagreements, it is too broad and mistakes the symptom for the disease. If one were to define deep disagreements in opposition to arguing to the point of capitulation, then one would omit the more fundamental feature of deep disagreements which is, crucially, the *reason* for this fact -- a deep disagreement is a case where the clashing (or incommensurability) of each interlocutor's respective set of underlying principles has the *effect* of precluding agreement on the conditions that would allow for the resolution of the disagreement to be achieved in the first place. An effective resolution to a deep disagreement would need address these underlying principles, instead of the single proposition at issue.

### 3.2. Compromise

There are two small cupcakes and two people very hungry people whose favourite source of sustenance is cupcakes. Despite both parties' desire to eat both cupcakes, a compromise is struck and both parties end up with one cupcake. Compromise is a familiar, effective and useful strategy to adopt in a disagreement. However, as I will show, any compromise at which we arrive cannot be understood as a resolution to *deep* disagreements because, at best, it is armistice, not peace.

Hales points to compromise as a strategy adopted in cases which, like deep disagreements, appear utterly hopeless. Indeed, Hales directly relates compromise to disagreements over abortion by providing the example of how

an abortion conservative (who believes that all abortions, even of zygotes, is morally impermissible) and an abortion liberal (who believes that all abortions, even of very late term fetuses, is morally permissible) might settle their differences through

compromise on a moderate position. Perhaps they decide that early abortions are morally permissible, late abortions are not, and that they can amicably work out the middle-term boundary cases (Hales, p. 64).

This example from Hales, I think, serves to highlight just why compromise cannot be looked to as a legitimate resolution strategy for deep disagreements. While I think that Hales intends his example to ring true to some degree, as Hales himself points out, those who believe themselves to be in possession of the truth might not easily arrive at compromise when faced with a deeply held moral conviction (Hales, p. 65). Recent legislation in Georgia, Alabama and other American states (Al Jazeera) serve as a strong reminder that compromises are not long-term solutions.

Compromise is not about settling on the truth-value of the proposition or set of propositions about which we disagree, but is instead about deciding what to do. It is, of course, *rational*, because there is nothing in the notion of compromise which precludes us from making a case in favour of our own position. So I can make arguments that can certainly sway the outcome, as can you, but these are cases where we end up agreeing on some other proposition than that over which we disagreed to begin with. After the disagreement is over, both interlocutors can think of themselves as having been right, but being put at an impasse by the other, who was wrong but at least willing to compromise. The interlocutors don't end up agreeing on what they *think* so much as agreeing on what to *do*. Valuable, to be sure, but different. Ultimately, I think that a compromise is something we can arrive at *despite* a deep disagreement, but it is not a resolution to the deep disagreement.

### 3.3. Ambiguity

We might resolve a disagreement by identifying an ambiguity in our respective uses of the terms involved in the disputed proposition. The classic example, which is cited by Hales (p. 65), is from William James who uncovers an ambiguity in order to settle a disagreement regarding squirrel going round the tree exactly opposite a person walking round the tree. If we ask whether the person has gone around the squirrel, then the correct answer depends upon whether we intend going round the squirrel to mean either from north, to east, to south, to west or from left, to front, to right, to back. In the first case yes and in the second case no. Once the ambiguity has been identified, the disagreement simply fizzles away (James, p. 24).

In addition to cases where the ambiguity is related to the terms involved in the description of some proposition, Hales includes *contextualism* as a kind of ambiguity which is related to the shifting meanings that a word or statement can have based on the setting in which it is used. On a contextualist understanding, apparent disagreements dissolve once we take into account the context in which the statement is made (Hales, p. 66). One example is that, when asked whether we would endorse someone's knowing that arsenic is poisonous based on a single utterance, the contextualist looks to the setting in which the utterance was made. The contextualist claims that we can rightly claim to know that arsenic is poisonous in a casual context, but not if we were unable to justify our assertion that arsenic is poison during an in-depth graduate level biology exam on the effects of arsenic on humans (Rysiew, §1). Similarly, a strawberry may well be considered a berry in a casual context, but not in a conversation with a botanist.

Ambiguities of either sort can be differentiated from arguing to the point of capitulation on the grounds that once a person is made aware of the ambiguity, that person gets to save face, so to speak, by saying "well it still *looks* like a square if you hold it like this" or something to that effect.

I think that this is key to the appeal of ambiguity, as it involves a collaborative approach to disagreement resolution which sets all involved parties up for continued productive discourse.

Sadly, this type of resolution really seems inapplicable to deep disagreements. It seems appropriate to me to describe this kind of resolution as appealing to *deeper* level agreement about underlying principles to resolve a *surface* level disagreement. I think that seeing contextualism as a resolution strategy to deep disagreements amounts to affirming the consequent in so far as one would have to make the jump from the (correct) statement “If there is a resolution for a deep disagreement, then that disagreement’s resolution will have to do with deeper level beliefs” to “This is a case of disagreement resolution which has to do with deeper level beliefs, so it must be a resolution to a deep disagreement.”

Another objection to ambiguity as a resolution strategy, outlined by both Hales (p. 67) and Francén (pp. 26-27), is that it doesn’t really do justice to the idea of disagreement. The objection is that seeking out ambiguity amounts to pretending that there *are not* genuine disagreements, that we *were not* disagreeing about that thing, but both saying true things about different things. By way of contrast, a deep disagreement can be a case where I *am* saying A (abortion is to be permitted), and you *are* saying not-A (abortion is not to be permitted), and I understand your saying not-A just fine, while you understand my saying A just fine. Seeking out ambiguity in cases such as these doesn’t seem to help.

### **3.4. Skepticism**

The resolution strategy Hales calls “Pyrrhonian skepticism” (Hales, p. 67) is defined with reference to “Sextus’s ‘Skeptic Way’ [of] suspending judgment without hope of leaving the state of suspension” (Hales, p. 68). As a resolution strategy, the Pyrrhonian skeptic attempts to take a seat *outside* of the disagreement, from which she might adjudicate it fairly. (Hales, pp. 67-68). As much as this might seem plausible, sensible or even laudable, we don’t really get the option to stay in this state of suspension. Occasion to act is inevitable. Pyrrho walking off the cliff demands that he come to a *judgment* to the effect that that thing approaching that appears to be the edge of a cliff is, in fact, *not* the edge of a cliff, or is at least not to be treated as such.

There is certainly value to skepticism, in so far as it is contrasted with credulity, but the kind of skepticism which would be relevant in a deep disagreement would be skepticism about one’s own views (since a deep disagreement assumes ample skepticism towards the competing view). Ultimately, I think that fallibilism is a more sensible epistemic stance than skepticism. I’m inclined to endorse the pragmatist’s rejection of the idea that genuine doubt is the kind of thing a person can decide to do. And, as a result of the methodological difficulties highlighted in Aikin’s characterization of the problem of deep disagreements as a symmetrical version of the problem of the criterion, the kinds of evidence with which an arguer is presented in a deep disagreement cannot be assumed to necessitate (or even push her to) abandon her own position.

### **3.5. Relativism**

If you and I arrive at a relativistic resolution to a disagreement, then I come to view your claim as true for you but false for me, while you come to view my claim as true for me but false for you. A relativistic strategy for the resolution of a deep disagreement would involve understanding the truth-value of whatever sentence over which we disagree as nothing more than the value that that sentence receives relative to the series of sentences which happen to describe either interlocutor’s

world view. The resolution is supposed to be that I see that you are right while I see that I am *also* right, but I now see your answer as sensible, as well reasoned, as tenable, and so we stop arguing. Hales thinks this will work in the case of deep disagreement and advances relativism as a viable resolution strategy to settle a debate between Jack (an atheist) and Diane (a theist) who disagree over a proposition, P', which asserts that souls are essential characteristics of human beings

The dispute between Jack and Diane is resolved by determining that P' is both true and false. P' is true relative to Diane's perspective, a perspective which includes as an epistemological component the methodology of appeal to revelation, the Bible, and its expert interpreters as a source of noninferential beliefs. P' is false relative to Jack's perspective, the epistemology of which includes analytic rationalism (Hales, p. 81).

Relativism is sometimes likened to contextualism or ambiguity (e.g., Hales, p. 69, Francén) because both settle the disagreement by 1) appealing to the system of beliefs which results in the disagreement and 2) admitting that different conceptual schemes will lead to the endorsement of different claims. The most obvious way that ambiguity and relativism can be *differentiated* is by highlighting that ambiguity seems to indicate a way forward while relativism just tells me that I've won a game of my own invention. While uncovering an ambiguity allows me to understand that I *do* endorse your claim when I see it your way, relativism makes the counterfactual claim that I *would* endorse your claim if I were to see it your way – but the fact remains that I don't.

Victoria Lavorerio offers a response to Hales on relativism as resolution strategy I take to be convincing. Her primary objection to relativism is that it demands what calls the "impossible epistemic judgement" (Lavorerio, §3) that each interlocutor grant legitimacy to claims derived from a framework which she views as *false*. The physicist will not be swayed by how methodologically soundly a horoscope was written. The central point of Lavorerio's objection to relativism as a viable strategy to adopt when faced with a deep disagreement is that, without endorsing the other's conceptual framework, either party would still think of herself as right (Lavorerio, § 3). For this reason, relativism posited as a *resolution* to deep disagreement amounts to little more than the forfeiture of the possibility of disagreement resolution, the admission that we are at a hopeless impasse.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Deep disagreements are understood as the clashing of incommensurable conceptual frameworks or systems of belief. The preceding examination has been intended to serve as a means of elucidating the distinction between a normal disagreement and a deep disagreement. I have examined five disagreement resolution strategies and deemed none of them adequate in the face of a deep disagreement. Throughout this examination, I have identified the following marks of any satisfactory solution to a deep disagreement. Any adequate resolution for a deep disagreement must 1) affect a change in the interlocutors' respective conceptual frameworks, 2) offer a long-lasting solution to the disagreement, 3) involve the acknowledgement that the disagreement is a real, rather than illusory disagreement.



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