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There are Disagreements and Disagreements: A Reply to Wagemans

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An argument without an audience is pointless, and an argument without an arguer is no more than a potential set of sentences. In his response to my earlier paper (Hinton 2019) on the ability of argumentation theory to deal with expert disagreements, Jean Wagemans makes important points about the need to consider argumentation as an activity involving arguers: it is what he calls 'the communicative process by which people try to convince others of the acceptability of their point of view' (Wagemans 2019, 9), and those people are an essential element. It is important, therefore, to consider what the audience is aware of and what it is not, as well as what the arguer is trying to achieve. In this, we are in agreement.

Wagemans goes on to discuss the possibility that audiences may be unaware of disagreement amongst experts, or may see such disagreement, as in the climate change debate, where, in fact, none exists. In these cases, argumentation schemes for assessing expert opinion, like that in Walton, Reed, and Macagno (2008), are of value in that they can allow us to reject certain arguments as being not really based on 'expert' views, and give us a better understanding of whether or not there actually is disagreement among experts. Again, I think this is a fair point. I don't think it is quite right to say that I ignored the audience, but certainly the focus of my paper was on cases where the schemes would suggest that there is disagreement between experts, and I claimed that they, and argumentation theory more generally, were impotent in the resolution of the knotty question: whom to believe?

Genuine Expert Disagreement

In my paper, I referred several times to 'genuine' expert agreement, meaning that 'there is actual, sincere disagreement, that the parties to it are held to be experts by those considering their views, and that the point of disagreement is within the field of expertise of both' (2019, 169). I did not expand much on this, however, and I think that the recognition of genuine disagreement is an area where argumentation theory does possess the tools to help. I also suggested that such disagreements are rare, and certainly far rarer than we are led to believe by the clashing parties in public debate who champion the views of certain authorities backing their own positions. In what follows, then, I shall look at the ways in which what are taken to be disagreements between experts may be identified as only apparent and not genuine.

As my definition above made clear, there are three criteria which must be met for opposing views to be considered to constitute a genuine expert disagreement, and apparent disagreements may fall foul of any of them. Firstly, there may be no actual disagreement; secondly, the protagonists may not be experts; and, thirdly, the subject of the disagreement may not fall within their field of competence. The second of these concerns the identification of experts, a theme I discussed in my earlier paper, and which has received a great deal of attention recently[1]. The last is an empirical question which may be difficult to answer, but, if our experts have been identified as experts *in something*, then there must be an answer to it. It is in the discussion of the first criterion where argumentation theory can make a telling contribution.

[1] See the special issues of *Topoi* 2018, 37 (1), and *Social Epistemology* 2018, 32 (6) for a range of views.

There are a number of ways in which apparent disagreements can be found to be just that: apparent, rather than real and substantial, and I shall discuss five of them. One assumption that I make is that expert opinions are based on and supported, at least implicitly, by some kind of argument. Part of being recognised as an expert involves having grounds for one's assertions, not merely plucking them from the air as one sees fit.

Merely Verbal Disputes

The separation of disputes into the substantive and the merely verbal has some tradition in philosophy. There are cases where the exact understanding of the meaning of a word does have a decisive impact on real world outcomes, and this has led some to distinguish between verbal disputes and 'merely' verbal disputes (Chalmers 2011), but generally disagreements which are considered to rest on use of language are not treated as 'real' disputes at all. This can be problematic in expert discourse because words are used by those experts which may not be readily understood by the wider population, and when technical words are used by two experts with different meanings, matters become even more confused.

The important point here, and one which will be echoed in the sections below, is to bear in mind that when the public looks to experts for guidance, it is usually because people need to know what they should do, not because they are interested in the theoretical niceties of the field. This means that appeals to expert opinion tend to involve cases of practical reasoning, where what matters is the course of action suggested. Cases where a dispute is a question of definitions or conceptualising, but which do not lead to a difference in recommended action, need not be considered genuine expert disagreements from the standpoint of the layman, even if the debate is a matter of importance to those experts themselves.

A case in point is the question over whether carbon dioxide should be classified as a pollutant[2]. Those who oppose the designation tend to be climate change sceptics, however, the dispute over whether or not CO_2 is officially classed as a pollutant has no bearing on whether or not producing more of it causes climate change. The disagreement is purely verbal, and is irrelevant to decisions over any action one might take: a scientist who objects to the use of the word pollutant about a naturally abundant gas is not thereby dismissing its role in the climate system.

Incoherent Positions

A full analysis of arguments will often show them to contain flaws—that much is obvious. The problem in cases of expert opinion is that much of the reasoning which has led to the final position of the expert is undisclosed, especially to the layman who does not read scientific articles, or is too technical to follow anyway. This means that a full analysis is not always possible. One element which can be looked at closely, however, is the language which is used in stating the expert opinion.

My own development of an Informal Argument Semantics[3] allows the language of arguments to be examined and assessed, and is designed to expose a range of linguistic

[2] Nunez (2019), gives a brief, popular science, explanation of when it might be.
[3] This tool was described at the European Conference on Argumentation, Groningen, June 2019, but has not yet been published.

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fallacies. Some of these, such as equivocation, usually require the analysis of the full argument, but others may be revealed in the conclusion alone, and, crucially, what can be inferred from it. Such inferences might be of a logical or scientific kind, but might also be what are known in linguistics as implicatures (Grice 1975). An example of that would be that the position 'climate change is not driven by human activity' has the conversational implicature that 'climate change is driven by something other than human activity'. An apparent expert who made the first claim, but could not expand on what that 'something other' might be, would lose credence.

A deep analysis of the semantics of arguments may also reveal that certain philosophical mistakes have been made, such as mistaking concepts in language for phenomena in the real world, or that the speaker is guilty of redefining a word to suit his own purposes (see Aberdein 2006, for a review of such tactics). It may simply be the case that the language of the expert's statement is too vague, under-determined, or ambiguous to be properly understood; or even that the words used are semantically incompatible with one another. When an argument is found to contain one of these types of fallacy, it is rejected. When one of two clashing expert opinions displays the same characteristic we can resolve the disagreement: a coherent statement cannot be said to be in disagreement with an incoherent one, since the latter has no acceptable and comprehensible meaning.

Deep Disagreements

The concept of deep disagreement was introduced to argumentation theory by Robert Fogelin (2005) in an influential paper. At root, his idea is that in order for argument to take place, the two sides must have a good amount of common ground; they must have some shared beliefs about the conduct of argument and the resolution of problems such as the one they are discussing. For example, one could, perhaps, argue with a flat Earther about the shape of the Earth, but one couldn't argue with him about weather patterns because the Earth's being spherical would be a basic assumption of one's understanding of such patterns.

The degree to which genuinely deep, irresolvable disagreements exist is still the subject of some debate[4]. It has been argued that all foundational beliefs are at some level open to debate, and it is also unclear just how much common ground there must be for argument to be potentially fruitful: after all, no two of us share exactly the same set of background beliefs.

The importance of this in the case of apparent expert disagreements is the following: when laymen hear differing opinions they assume that there is an argument to be had, that the two viewpoints can be compared by some standard, and the truth, or at least the stronger claim, revealed even if they are not capable of making that comparison themselves. I have suggested elsewhere (Hinton 2018) that in order to be considered an expert in a particular field, one must accept and employ the method of resolution of doubtful cases which is a basic part of the definition of what that field is. One may be a wise and wondrous man with great knowledge of the natural world, but one cannot be a biologist, or any kind of scientist, if one does not resolve doubts by seeking evidence.

[4] See, for example, Campolo (2018) and Duran (2016).

When we have apparent expert disagreements which are, in fact, deep disagreements, that is, based on conflicting framework beliefs, we can state that they are not genuine expert disagreements because the two authorities are not experts in the same field. In order to know which opinion it is reasonable to believe, we must only determine which field is the appropriate one. An example would be a clash of views between a clergyman and a moral philosopher. Both might, at first sight be considered experts on ethics, but their fundamental beliefs about the resolution of ethical problems are at odds; neither opinion can ever be said to trump the other because there is no shared paradigm in which they can be compared. The poor soul trying to decide what to do on the basis of their advice must decide not which expert, and therefore which opinion, is better, but which field is relevant: philosophy or religion.

Irrelevant Points

All argumentation theorists agree that a good argument must be relevant, but standards of relevance are hard to come by. What is of interest to us here is that positions which are claimed to counter one another or to weaken another's argument often, on closer examination, do no such thing. This may be the case because expert statements have been misunderstood, or because they were not sufficiently precise in the first place. In the rush to cite expert support for their own views, activists are often a little careless in checking whether or not the opinion they refer to is actually in direct opposition to the one they wish to rebut.

An example of this would be the use of a statement from a respected scientist that 'changes in the sun affect the Earth's climate' in support of a denial of human impact on the climate. The statement may be presented as one supporting a viewpoint in opposition to that of other scientists, but, of course, there is no disagreement between the experts: all agree that the sun influences the Earth, and no-one has stated that humans do not. Although fanatics and lobbyists can be skilled at using such statements to their own advantage, the patient and critical layman is capable of detecting such sleight of hand through a careful consideration of what the expert is actually supposed to have said.

Matching Conclusions

This final category brings us back to the comments Wagemans makes in his paper about the difference between reasoning and argumentation. The arguments one employs publically are those calculated to have most influence on the audience and do not necessarily reflect the exact course of one's own private reasoning. One makes one's arguments public in order to achieve some end and if another speaker is arguing to the same end, but with a different pattern of premise and inference, even, perhaps, one which contradicts one's own, there is no real disagreement. We have no justification for the belief that when an arguer, even a sincere one, gives reasons to believe a statement that those reasons were the ones which convinced him or that he considers those reasons to be convincing to a rational mind. Differences in argument strategy do not constitute a disagreement between the arguers as far as the question at issue is concerned.

What this means is that when deciding whether two people do, actually, disagree, and what it is that they do, actually, disagree about, we should look closely at what it is they are trying to

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get us to do. Suppose one medical expert says that it's important for everyone to have their 'flu vaccination this winter, and another says that actually, it's not that important, but it's probably a good idea, just to be on the safe side. There is an apparent disagreement over the importance of the jab, but actual agreement over the preferred outcome. The apparent disagreement may be only the result of differing rhetorical strategy—after all, what does 'important' mean scientifically?

The political world provides frequent examples of apparent disagreements which are not disagreements at all over the issue at hand, but over some unrelated issue on which neither politician is an expert. Imagine a Finance Minister debating with the opposition Finance spokesperson, and imagine too, if you can, that they are both experts on fiscal policy. Naturally, they appear to disagree on everything; they have no choice but to do so. Yet, after the election, when the spokesperson has been installed as the new Minister, very little changes: tax rates stay the same, spending targets are kept. The two rivals did not, in fact, disagree about fiscal policy at all—only about who should be riding in the ministerial limousine. Both the rhetoric of disagreement and disagreements in rhetoric can lead to confusion over whether genuine disagreement exists or not. In cases where the outcome of differing arguments is, in practical terms, the same, we need not be concerned with which line of expert reasoning to follow: the experts do not, in fact, disagree.

Conclusion

The point raised by Jean Wagemans is a valid one: before we can suggest how the public should deal with expert disagreement we should ask whether they are aware of that disagreement, whether they are equipped with the skills to discern not just who is more credible of two conflicting authorities, but the very existence of that conflict. The audience should always be in the forefront of our thinking both when making arguments and when analysing the phenomenon of argument.

I have suggested here that what appear to be expert disagreements frequently are no such thing; and while I have not offered empirical evidence for that assertion (there were examples in my original article) I have shown how certain concepts employed in argumentation theory are capable of exposing apparent conflict as no conflict at all. Clearly, the educated citizen must be able to cope with disagreement and make rational choices notwithstanding, but equally that citizen should be equipped with the necessary skills to tell apart the apparent from the genuine disagreement, and an awareness of the five ways discussed in which that false appearance may occur would be a good place to start.

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