

RELATIVISM, FAULTLESSNESS, AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF DISAGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT: Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in relativism. Proponents have defended various accounts that seek to model the truth-conditions of certain propositions along the lines of standard possible world semantics. The central challenge for such views has been to explain what advantage they have over contextualist theories with regard to the possibility of disagreement. I will press this worry against Max Kölbel's account of faultless disagreement. My case will proceed along two distinct but connected lines. First, I will argue that the sense of faultlessness made possible by his relativism conflicts with our intuitive understanding of disagreement. And second, that his meta-epistemological commitments are at odds with the socio-epistemic function of disagreement. This latter problem for relativistic accounts of truth has thus far been largely ignored in the literature.

KEYWORDS: disagreement, faultlessness, epistemology, relativism, semantics

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in relativism. Proponents have defended various semantic accounts that seek to model the truth-conditions of certain propositions along the lines of standard possible world semantics. Taste predicates, knowledge ascriptions, epistemic modals, and future contingents have all been given relativistic treatments.¹ However, the central challenge for such views has been to explain what advantage they have over contextualist theories with regard to the possibility of disagreement.

My aims in this paper are fairly modest. I will press the worry about disagreement against the work of Max Kölbel, who offers an account of truth relativism as an explanation of 'faultless disagreement.' For ease of exposition, I will confine my discussion to claims of what is tasty, though the arguments here presented are readily generalizable to other domains. My case against Kölbel will

¹ For example, see Max Kölbel, "The Evidence for Relativism," *Synthese* 166 (2009): 375-395, John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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proceed along two distinct but connected lines. First, I will argue that the sense of faultlessness made possible by his relativism conflicts with our intuitive understanding of disagreement. And second, that his meta-epistemological commitments are at odds with the socio-epistemic function of disagreement. This latter problem for relativistic accounts of truth has thus far been largely ignored in the literature. We will consider these matters in turn.

2. Varieties of Disagreement and Objectivity

There are several distinct senses in which speakers may disagree, and it is important to start by clarifying which are relevant for our purposes. According to what we may label ‘attitudinal disagreement,’ A and B disagree by adopting incompatible non-doxastic attitudes towards some object or state of affairs. Examples include cases in which one person hopes for, fears, admires, or prefers something that another does not. Although interesting, these are not the sorts of disagreements with which we are here concerned.²

I will limit discussion to doxastic disagreements, which are cases in which A and B hold incompatible beliefs. Simple cases will involve A believing p and B believing not- p . Strictly speaking, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for doxastic disagreement that the content of A’s belief contradicts that of B’s.³ However, since Kölbel frames his account of faultless disagreement in terms of contradictory content, I will ignore such additional qualifications.

Following Cappelen and Hawthorne, we will also distinguish a state from an activity sense of disagreement. State disagreement arises between individuals holding inconsistent beliefs toward p , even if they are unaware of this fact or even of each other’s existence. For example, Plato and I may be in disagreement over his view of government in spite of the fact that there can be no interaction between us. Activity disagreement, on the other hand, “is the endpoint of a debate, argument, discussion, or negotiation.”⁴ Unlike state disagreement, it is necessary for activity disagreement that A and B are capable of interacting with each other in some way.

² For additional discussion of attitudinal disagreement, see Torfinn Huvenes, “Disagreement without Error,” *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 143-154.

³ See Teresa Marques, “Doxastic Disagreement,” *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 121-142 for a helpful discussion of this point.

⁴ Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne, *Relativism and Monadic Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60.

We can naturally express state disagreement by saying that A and B are ‘in’ disagreement, and activity disagreement by saying they are ‘having’ a disagreement.⁵

Although distinct from each other, the recognition that one is in a state of disagreement may naturally precipitate having a disagreement. The fact that A and B hold inconsistent beliefs will sometimes lead them to engage in an argumentative process in which they exchange reasons with the intention of persuading each other. I will return to the epistemic function of activity disagreement in Sect. 5, but for now we will focus on state disagreement.

Kölbel seeks to preserve the intuition that two people can disagree over whether, e.g.

(L) ‘Licorice is tasty.’

while simultaneously recognizing that neither’s belief is false. He offers the following account:

A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker A, a thinker B, and a proposition (content of judgment) p , such that:

- (a) A believes (judges) that p and B believes (judges) that *not- p* and
- (b) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault).⁶

The first condition specifies what it means for two people to disagree. It is necessary for disagreement that the same proposition asserted or believed by one person is the negation of that asserted or believed by the other.⁷ The second condition specifies the relevant sense of faultlessness. On Kölbel’s view, faultlessness requires that neither person has made the mistake of believing something false.⁸ Truth thus plays its traditional role as a normative constraint on our beliefs.

If cases of faultless disagreement are possible, they do not arise in objective domains of discourse. For example, if I disagree with my wife over the amount of money in our bank account, presumably at most one of us can be right. Rightness is here a ‘zero-sum’ affair in the sense that if one of us is right, then the other must be wrong. Disagreement in objective domains signals that someone has a false belief.

⁵ I will maintain this usage in what follows.

⁶ Max Kölbel, “Faultless Disagreement,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2003): 53-54.

⁷ For simplicity, I will assume that speakers sincerely assert those contents that they believe to be true, and will therefore treat things like belief, assertion, and judgement interchangeably.

⁸ For an alternative account of faultless disagreement that relativizes justification rather than truth, see Duncan Pritchard, “Defusing Epistemic Relativism,” *Synthese* 166 (2009): 397-412.

But these sorts of cases contrast with those that Kölbel labels ‘non-objective.’ Claims regarding what is tasty in particular seem to depend not only on the properties of the items in question, but also on certain responses and features of experiencing subjects. With regard to a claim like (L), we may not be so quick to accept the idea that one person’s being right implies that anyone holding a contradictory belief is wrong. Kölbel thus takes the question of whether A and B can faultlessly disagree as a defining feature of his account of objectivity.

One initial worry is that Kölbel has defined objectivity in such a way that he is able to get faultless disagreement too easily. Arguably, he has simply built the notion of faultless disagreement into his account of what it means for some content to be non-objective. It should then come as no surprise that if we accept his account of objectivity, we are also committed to faultless disagreement. Since non-objective domains are those in which disagreement does not indicate the presence of anyone’s error, his characterization of objectivity presupposes faultless disagreement rather than offers independent support for it. But the existence of faultless disagreement requires argumentation, and not a definition of objectivity that entails it.

Were Kölbel to pick a more traditional conception of objectivity, his route to faultless disagreement would be less direct. For example, Rescher has offered a view of objectivity that is characterized by impartiality, freedom from personal biases and predilections, and universality.⁹ There is no direct step from this view of objectivity to the existence of faultless disagreement. But without reason to reject a more traditional view, Kölbel’s own view of objectivity appears objectionably *ad hoc*.

3. Contextualism versus Relativism

We will waive the above worry regarding Kölbel’s account of objectivity, and provisionally grant for the sake of argument that faultless disagreement in subjective domains is sometimes possible. The question then arises as to how we are to account for such disagreements.

One semantic theory rejected by relativists like Kölbel is contextualism. Contextualists treat claims containing taste predicates along the lines of Kaplan’s treatment of indexicals.¹⁰ In Kaplan’s two-dimensional framework, which content, i.e. proposition, is expressed by sentences containing indexical components varies

⁹ Nicholas Rescher, *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

¹⁰ David Kaplan, “Demonstratives,” in *Themes from Kaplan*, eds. Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 481-563.

with features of the context of use. For example, which proposition is expressed by an assertion of 'I have a headache' depends on a speaker and a time of utterance.

On a contextualist treatment of taste predicates, such claims make subtle indexical references to the speaker or to the speaker's standards. This means that A's assertion of (L) really expresses something to the effect of, 'According to my standard of taste, licorice is tasty.' The actual content expressed by our assertions that something is tasty therefore diverges from our surface grammar.

The standard objection to contextualism – which Kölbel endorses – is that it fails to preserve an intuitive sense of disagreement. In a straightforward use of indexicals, A's assertion that 'I have a headache' is compatible with B's assertion that 'I do not have a headache.' Since each speaker takes herself as the intended referent of 'I,' the contents of their assertions are distinct and may both be true. This possibility of mutual rightness undermines an intuitive sense of disagreement. And the same considerations apply *mutatis mutandis* to claims like (L). While A's assertion of (L) *appears* to be the semantic negation of B's assertion of not-(L), in fact both assertions may be true due to the posited shift in content.

Kölbel presents this argument against contextualism as well, noting that it fails to preserve "the sense in which we intuitively think that we contradict one another."¹¹ The specific sense he has in mind is classical: "I am here interested in a semantic notion of contradiction: roughly, contradictory contents cannot both be true at once."¹² Since contextualism makes it possible for both of their beliefs to be true, A and B simply talk past each other. But the possibility of such mutual rightness prevents them from genuinely disagreeing with each other.

Kölbel's solution is to relativize the truth, rather than the content, to an individual's standard of taste. An assertion of (L) will express the same content for all speakers in all contexts. However, its truth will vary with different standards. In Kaplan's semantics, the truth-value of a contingent proposition expressed by a sentence is determined by a circumstance of evaluation, taken as an ordered pair $\langle w, t \rangle$, where w is a possible world and t is a time. Kölbel proposes an analogous treatment, in which we replace t in the circumstance of evaluation with some standard of taste s . And just as we can shift from one world or time to another, Kölbel introduces the "FOR" operator, which has the function of shifting from one person's

¹¹ Max Kölbel, "Indexical Relativism versus Genuine Relativism," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, 3 (2004): 305.

¹² Max Kölbel, "Agreement and Communication," *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 104.

standard of taste to another's within the same world.¹³ Use of this operator in English is supported by our use of sentences like 'For Mae, licorice is delicious.' – formally, $\ulcorner \text{FOR } s, p \urcorner$. The distinctly semantic nature of Kölbel's relativism is now apparent. He states that

The relativist has in mind a variation in truth value that goes beyond relativity to possible worlds. The relativist claims that even once we hold the possible world fixed, the value of the proposition ...still varies with a standard of evaluation. We might call this the "standard of taste parameter" in the circumstances of evaluation...The relativist proposal is a natural extension of Kaplan's semantic framework.¹⁴

Relativism is then supposed to explain the existence of faultless disagreement in the following way. Both A and B are subject to the normative requirement that they ought not to believe or assert what is false relative to their own standard. Faultlessness consists in adherence to this relativized truth norm. And since the content of their beliefs and assertions is invariant, it is now possible for A and B to contradict each other in the way necessary for disagreement. I will challenge this proposal in the next section, but first I want to say something about Kölbel's reliance on standard semantics.

Kölbel's claim that his relativistic semantics is a natural and modest extension of Kaplan's framework is controversial.¹⁵ Although Kaplan's framework leaves open the possibility of adding features beyond worlds to the circumstance of evaluation, there is a determinate answer to the question of which circumstance is privileged for the assessment of a contingent claim: that of the context of use.¹⁶ Kölbel's framework, on the other hand, offers no uniquely privileged standard of taste relative to which the truth of claims like (L) can be assessed.¹⁷ (L)'s truth can thus be variously assessed relative to a potentially infinite number of standards, including those of A, B, C, or D. However, standards themselves cannot be objectively or neutrally compared to each other. Indeed, privileging certain standards over others

¹³ Such an operator requires us to countenance contents that are taste neutral, but we will not consider their plausibility here.

¹⁴ Max Kölbel, "The Evidence for Relativism," *Synthese* 166 (2009): 383.

¹⁵ For a fuller critique of the relativist's attempt to pattern their view on standard semantics, see Michael Glanzberg, "Semantics and Truth Relative to a World," *Synthese* 166 (2009): 281-307.

¹⁶ What Kaplan calls "the circumstance of the context." See Kaplan, "Demonstratives," 522.

¹⁷ In Kölbel's words, "None of these ways of evaluating the utterance seems to be clearly privileged, in the way the actual world is privileged in the evaluation of contingent utterances." Kölbel, "The Evidence for Relativism," 287.

“goes against the basic commitments of the relativist.”¹⁸ It is this inability to evaluate our standards that, I will argue, poses fundamental problems for disagreement.

4. Against the Possibility of Faultless Disagreement

We will start by considering whether Kölbel’s framework can account for a state sense of disagreement. Before presenting my own response to Kölbel, I want to consider a few existing objections. Rosenkranz presents the following dilemma for Kölbel’s account of faultless disagreement:

Either A and B are said to merely present P and $\sim P$, respectively, as being true relative to their own perspective, in which case the relative truth of P and $\sim P$ ensures that their assertions are correct but there is no longer any genuine disagreement between them. Or else, they are said to present these propositions as being true *simpliciter* (true absolutely, true relative to all perspectives), in which case they do indeed disagree but relativism fails to show that their disagreement is faultless.¹⁹

For obvious reasons, the relativist will reject as question-begging an account whereby the very act of asserting a claim requires a commitment to its absolute truth.²⁰ But neither will she accept Rosenkranz’s claim that “in asserting P , A presents P as being true relative to A ’s perspective.”²¹ The substance of his objection is essentially that the relativist’s semantics collapses into contextualism. But as we have seen, Kölbel is clear to distinguish his view from contextualism. For Kölbel, while standards play a truth-determinative role with regard to our assertions and beliefs, reference to them does *not* form part of the content of what is asserted. While the relativist does bear the explanatory burden of clarifying her aims in making assertions, Kölbel can borrow the following response from MacFarlane:

The relativist need not, and should not, hold that to put p forward as true for oneself is to put forward the claim *that p is true for oneself*. The point of “for oneself” is not to characterize the *content* that is asserted, but to characterize what the

¹⁸ Max Kölbel, “Global Relativism and Self-Refutation,” in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven Hales (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 23.

¹⁹ Sven Rosenkranz, “Frege, Relativism and Faultless Disagreement,” in *Relative Truth*, eds. Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Max Kölbel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 231.

²⁰ This sort of objection to relativism is familiar from John Mackie, “Self-Refutation – A Formal Analysis,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1964): 193-203, and Miles Burnyeat, “Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato’s *Theaetetus*,” *The Philosophical Review* 85 (1976): 172-195.

²¹ Rosenkranz, “Frege, Relativism and Faultless Disagreement,” 228.

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relativist is *doing* in making her assertion: putting its content forward as *true for herself* [italics in original].²²

I therefore do not think that Rosenkranz's objection is ultimately successful. Boghossian offers a different objection, one that challenges the idea that the disagreement can be faultless.

The Argument from (Perspectival) Immersion:

- (1) The content (p) is at best relatively true. (Alethic Relativism)
- (2) If D judges validly that p, it will also be valid for D to judge that *It's true that p*. (Truth is Disquotational within a perspective)
- (3) If D judges that *It's true that p* then D must, on pain of incoherence, judge that *It's false that not-p*.
- (4) If D judges that *It's false that not-p*, then D must, on pain of incoherence, judge that anyone who judges *not-p* (e.g., N) is making a *mistake*.
- (5) Therefore, D must judge that N is making a mistake and so cannot regard the disagreement with N as faultless.
- (6) Therefore, the disagreement between D and N is not faultless.²³

The problem with Boghossian's argument is that it saddles the relativist with an absolutist account of faultlessness. Recall that for Kölbel, faultlessness consists in not violating any norm to which one is subject, meaning that D and N have not judged anything false relative to *their own* perspective. If D faultlessly judges that *It's false that not-p*, then he will have correctly judged relative to his perspective that *not-p* is false.²⁴ However, this does not entail that D must judge that N (who judges that *not-p* is true) has made a mistake *simpliciter*, since relative to N's perspective her contradictory judgment may also be faultless.

For Kölbel, judgments of faultlessness, like truth, depend on the standards in question. Relative to D's standards, N's judgment is false, and *vice versa*. But relative to the standards for each *that matter*, i.e. their own, neither has made a mistake. Boghossian's argument seems to ignore this fact, leaving room for the relativist to respond that D's judgement that N has made a mistake *simpliciter* illegitimately treats her judgement as subject to *his* standards, rather than to her own.

²² MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, 33.

²³ Paul Boghossian, "Three Kinds of Relativism," in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven Hales (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 62.

²⁴ We must remember that relativizing clauses will not form part of the content of a thinker's judgement. As discussed above, this reading of the relativist's semantics would slide back into contextualism.

In fairness to Boghossian, there is something odd about the relativist's sense of faultlessness, a point to which I will return in the next section. But here I want to challenge the idea that thinkers can genuinely disagree over claims like (L), all the while taking seriously Kölbel's view that their truth (rather than content) varies with standards. Consider the following argument, which I will refer to as

The Argument against Genuine Disagreement:

- (7) If A and B are in genuine disagreement regarding p , then A and B contradict each other—A believes p while B believes not- p . (assumption)
- (8) If A and B contradict each other, then it cannot be the case that A's belief that p and B's belief that not- p are simultaneously true. (assumption)
- (9) If A and B are in genuine disagreement regarding p , then it cannot be the case that A's belief that p and B's belief that not- p are simultaneously true. (by 7 and 8)
- (10) Suppose that truth is relativized to standards. (assumption)
- (11) If truth is relativized to standards, then it can be the case that A's belief that p and B's belief that not- p are simultaneously true—A and B are faultless. (assumption)
- (12) It can be the case that A's belief that p and B's belief that not- p are simultaneously true. (by 10 and 11)
- (13) It's not the case that A and B contradict each other. (by 8 and 12)
- (14) It's not the case that A and B are in genuine disagreement regarding p . (by 7 and 13)
- (15) Therefore, it's not the case that A and B are in faultless disagreement regarding p . (*a fortiori*, from 14).

This argument, if successful, would show that faultless disagreement is impossible regardless of distinctions we might draw between objective and subjective domains of discourse. Since it is valid, we must examine the premises in light of Kölbel's commitments.

The key premises are (7), (8), (10), and (11). According to (7), contradiction is a necessary condition of disagreement. Kölbel could reject this premise, but this move would conflict with his earlier acceptance of it in his definition of faultless disagreement – see his condition (a). Further, recall that it was the fact that contextualism prevented the parties to the dispute from contradicting each other that motivated his rejection of this view. To drop contradiction as a necessary condition of disagreement would therefore undermine his primary reason for rejecting contextualism.²⁵ Additionally, Kölbel has explicitly defended (10) and (11).

²⁵ To clarify, I am not committed to a view of disagreement in which parties hold contradictory beliefs. However, since Kölbel holds this view, *he* is committed to this premise.

The pivotal premise, and the one Kölbel must reject if he is to block the conclusion, is (8). However, Kölbel explicitly accepts this standard view of a contradiction.²⁶ There is a puzzling tension at the heart of Kölbel's account of faultless disagreement. Relativizing truth to parameters beyond possible worlds is supposed to allow A and B's contradictory beliefs to be simultaneously true, and thus for their disagreement to be faultless. But the possibility of mutual correctness required for faultless disagreement lies in tension with the condition that p and not- p contradict each other. The fact that possible worlds are free of contradictions is in the most general sense why we take them to be *possible* in the first place. It is definitional that if two propositions are contradictory, then they *cannot* be simultaneously true at any world w .²⁷

Kölbel tries to avoid formal inconsistency by emphasizing that p and not- p are true *relative to different perspectives*. But this qualification does not address the fundamental problem that his view entails the existence of contradictions within what he claims are standard possible worlds.

Assume for the sake of argument that we can reconcile such contradictions with possible worlds. There is still the problem of accounting for genuine disagreement. To see this, consider a case in which A and B occupy different possible worlds. A correctly judges that the contingent proposition 'Trump won the 2016 Presidential election' is true, while B correctly judges this same proposition to be false. Since their beliefs concern different worlds, A and B do not contradict each other and thus on Kölbel's account they do not disagree.²⁸ Intuitively, this seems to be the right result. The reason there does not seem to be any disagreement is that both propositions may be true relative to the worlds relevant to their evaluation.

There are independent reasons to extend an account of disagreement beyond cases involving contradictions, but there are limits to how far we can extend such an account. At the very least, cases of genuine disagreement require that the claims in question are in some sense incompatible with each other.²⁹ Ordinarily, once we recognize such incompatibility, the natural move is to abandon the "disagreement"

²⁶ Recall his earlier quote that "contradictory contents cannot both be true at once." Kölbel, "Agreement and Communication," 104.

²⁷ Formally, $w \models \neg A$ iff $w \not\models A$.

²⁸ The distinction between what a proposition is about and what it concerns is due to John Perry, "Thought without Representation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 60, (1986): 137-151. A claim is *about* what it explicitly refers to, and *concerns* those objects to which its truth is relative.

²⁹ For additional discussion, see Carl Baker, "The Role of Disagreement in Semantic Theory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92 (2014): 37-54.

as only apparent. The relativist may respond that although this holds in objective domains, things are otherwise in subjective domains such as taste.

But this response seems *ad hoc*, since the requirement of incompatibility underwrites philosophical discussions of disagreement outside of semantics. For example, much has been written recently about how one should rationally respond to cases of recognized peer disagreement.³⁰ These are cases in which one recognizes that someone else just as competent and epistemically well-situated with regard to the matter at hand nevertheless holds an incompatible belief. The best explanation of why such cases are thought to present epistemic challenges to one's continued belief is surely that it cannot be the case that both your own and your peer's belief are true. Given the fact that at most one of you can be right, the epistemic challenge consists in explaining what reason there is to think that it is one's peer rather than oneself that is mistaken.

If we carry the above considerations from worlds to taste standards, the right result in cases in which the content of A and B's belief are compatible is that they are not in disagreement with each other. Since both propositions may be true relative to the standards which are relevant for the assessment of each's belief, any apparent disagreement is only that, i.e. apparent. So, even if we grant Kölbel that possible world semantics presents us with a kind of relativism, the right conclusion is that there is no disagreement.

So far I have presented challenges for the idea that Kölbel can account for doxastic state disagreement. We will now consider whether he can account for doxastic activity disagreement.

5. The Socio-Epistemic Role of Disagreement

In addition to wanting our semantic theories to harmonize with an intuitively plausible account of state disagreement, we should also consider how well they

³⁰ For a sample of what has become a substantial body of literature, see Jennifer Lackey, "A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance," in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 145-154, David Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 187-217, Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology, Vol. 1*, eds. John Hawthorne and Tamar Gendler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167-196, and Richard Feldman, "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement," in *Epistemological Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216-236.

comply with the epistemic norms governing our argumentative practices. These are interesting questions that lie at the intersection of our semantics and epistemology. But so far, the epistemic implications of relativism have not been given adequate treatment in the literature.³¹ The focus of this section is to consider how well the relativist can preserve the socio-epistemic role of disagreement.

Disagreement may serve many different functions. But within the context of social epistemology, its primary role is to rationally guide the formation, revision, and evaluation of our beliefs. Through disagreement, we are able to collectively engage in the pursuit of knowledge by using each other as epistemic resources.³² The recognition that we are in doxastic disagreement with someone often motivates us to engage in an argumentative activity in which we exchange reasons with the goal of convincing each other to change our minds. The specific kinds of reasons of interest to us in these disagreements are those that provide epistemic justification for our beliefs. And as Vahid points out,

However we think of epistemic justification, it is its intimate link with truth – in terms of our concern for believing what is true and not believing what is false – that is said to set it apart from other (purported) species of justification.³³

Disagreements conceived as a socio-epistemic activity thus involve the exchange of reasons relevant to a belief's truth. As seen, relativists like Kölbel have not abandoned the normative requirement to believe what is true. Rather, they have sought to relativize it. Accordingly, individuals are rationally required to believe what is true relative to their own standard. To borrow a nice phrase from Rovane, thinkers with different standards are “normatively insulated” from each other, since what is true and justified for one carries no epistemic force for the other.³⁴

Consider the application of these norms to a concrete example in which A and B recognize their state disagreement over (L), and are then motivated to persuade each other that they have a false belief. Since they are having a disagreement over a

³¹ J. A. Carter has also noted this deficiency, and gone some way toward addressing it. In particular, see his “Disagreement, Relativism and Doxastic Revision,” *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 155-172.

³² Alvin Goldman presents a very helpful discussion of the aims and norms governing our socio-epistemic practices. See his “Argumentation and Social Epistemology,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994): 27-49.

³³ Hamid Vahid, “Rationalizing Beliefs: Epistemic vs. Pragmatic Reasons,” *Synthese* 176, (2010): 449.

³⁴ Carol Rovane, “Relativism Requires Alternatives, not Disagreement or Relative Truth,” in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven Hales (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 37.

claim's truth, they should proceed by exchanging epistemic reasons. A can try to show B that he has mistakenly assessed (L)'s truth relative to B's own standard of taste (and *vice versa*), but we can stipulate that neither has committed this error. But A cannot legitimately offer reasons for B to change his mind based on the truth (falsity) of (L) relative to A's standards. This is simply because B is not subject to the norm to believe what is true relative to A's standards, but rather what is true relative to his own. His response to A's challenge will therefore consist in showing that (L) is true (false) relative to his own standard.

The upshot is that once A and B recognize these facts, continued attempts to change each other's mind would be inappropriate, since success would mean getting the other to violate an epistemic norm to which they are subject. This much is straightforward. But it also makes the prospects of exchanging forceful epistemic reasons, and hence the possibility of engaging in a genuine disagreement, look rather dim. Since they are normatively shielded, they must recognize the fact that the continued exchange of reasons is futile. In a revealing moment of candor, MacFarlane admits this much:

The challenger thinks (rightly) that he has absolutely compelling grounds for thinking that the assertion was not accurate. But the original asserter thinks (also rightly, from her point of view) that the challenger's grounds do nothing to call in question the accuracy of the assertion. The asserter's vindication will seem to the challenger not to show that the assertion was accurate, and the challenger will continue to press his claim. (Until the game gets boring.) *Thus we have all the normative trappings of real disagreement*, but without the possibility of resolution except by a relevant change in one or both parties' contexts of assessment [my italics].³⁵

This is problem enough, but there is a deeper worry. Ordinarily, individuals who have reached the above impasse can proceed with the disagreement by shifting attention to their evaluative standards. For example, suppose that A and B are epistemic contextualists, and disagree over the justificatory status of the claim that A has hands. A's belief that he does is justified relative to ordinary standards, but unjustified relative to B's more demanding standards.

If A and B are to continue disagreeing after recognizing these facts, they must shift their disagreement to the question of whose standards are relevant in the present context. Unless they share the presupposition that there is some fact of the matter about whose standards are relevant, there is no point in continuing to

³⁵ John MacFarlane, "Relativism and Disagreement," *Philosophical Studies* 132 (2007): 29.

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disagree. They may not resolve the matter, but there is at least the necessary common ground that makes such higher-order disagreement possible.

Unfortunately, this same move is not available for relativists like Kölbel. The reason is that he rejects the thought that our evaluative standards are themselves subject to rational evaluation. A's standard of taste relative to which (L) is true is no better (or worse) than B's relative to which (L) is false. And both thinkers can of course recognize this fact. Unlike the case in the preceding paragraph, here there will not even be a shared assumption that *someone's* standards are uniquely relevant. Each standard is relevant for its possessor.

We may now return to MacFarlane's concluding remark that resolution of disagreement is impossible unless at least one person changes their standards. Given the fact that such standards are not subject to rational evaluation, it will not be possible for someone to change standards on the basis of rational disagreement and the exchange of epistemic reasons. They may of course do so for other reasons, but not for the sorts of reasons considered relevant to the epistemology of disagreement. Relativistic views like Kölbel's thus represent a significant departure from the role of disagreement in other philosophical contexts.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that Kölbel's relativistic framework faces significant challenges. In spite of his repeated attempts to account for disagreement, purported cases neither look nor function like disagreement in other philosophical contexts. Additionally, his account of truth fails to carry the usual normative weight that we attach to it. Kölbel offers us an outward form of truth while ultimately denying its epistemic power.