What is Disagreement?*

Disagreement –‘cognitive disagreement’, as it is sometimes called --seems a simple matter: two people disagree provided that for some claim p, one believes p, the other its negation. I’m going to argue that there is somewhat more to disagreement than this, and that understanding why reveals interesting things about our notions of error, truth, mistake and belief.

1. I begin with a pair of examples that don’t seem like straightforward cases of agreement or disagreement, though our definitions make them so. The first is inspired by Bernard Williams’ discussion of ‘thick terms’, ones (as Williams puts it) whose application is both guided by the world and is evaluative.¹ Imagine you and I are raised in a tradition in which acts, modes of dress, and so on are classified as chaste, lascivious, and the like. Though judgments about these matters can be subtle, there are standards for what is chaste, what lascivious, and what is not; we are, suppose, both excellent at discerning chastity and its opposite.

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¹ Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Harvard University Press, 1985).

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There comes a day, however, when you no longer see the point of thinking of behavior in terms of chastity. It is not that you no longer understand how to apply the words ‘chaste’ and ‘unchaste’. You still understand me when I say that Jones’ behavior is unchaste, you know that I am applying the word correctly. Do you agree with me? One has some inclination --I have an inclination --to say that you know that I know that the behavior in question is unchaste. Indeed, one has some inclination to say, since you see that I have applied ‘unchaste’ correctly, that you know that the behavior in question is unchaste. But one wants to deny that you agree with me: if anything, you disagree with me about whether the behavior --about whether any behavior --is unchaste.

Here is a second example. To celebrate the ascension of the Saints to Superbowl heaven, I have made a pot of gumbo, full of steaming okra. You think cooked okra is slimy and disgusting; I think it is delicious, not disgusting in the least. It seems obvious that we disagree --you think the okra is disgusting, I think it’s not. But if we disagree, mustn’t I say that you are mistaken? After all, though okra is not disgusting, you think it is. But I am loathe to say that you are mistaken --chacun a son gout, jedes Tierchen hat sein Plaisierchen, and all that.

There are a number of responses one might have to these examples. Some say that they are examples of “attitudinal disagreement” as opposed to “cognitive disagreement.” In the second example I like cooked okra, you dislike it; in the first example, I disapprove of certain sorts of behavior, while your attitude towards that behavior is one of toleration. Now, I agree that in these examples we have ‘opposed attitudes’. I agree that we would use the word ‘disagree’ to describe our opposed attitudes. But it is implausible that the puzzles the examples generate can be solved
simply by waving a hand towards “opposing attitudes”. If, for example, the
disagreement we sense when I say the okra is tasty and you deny it were merely
“attitudinal”, we should sense the same disagreement to be present when I say I like okra
and you say you dislike it. For this latter exchange is, if anything, more transparently a
manifestation of opposing attitudes. But we don’t find this exchange to involve the same
disagreement at all. If you say ‘okra is disgusting’ and I think you sincere, I can sensibly
say ‘what you said is wrong’; if you say ‘I don’t like okra myself’ and I think you
sincere, little sense can be made of my saying ‘what you said is wrong.’

Some say the examples are not puzzling. They think that sentences like ‘okra is
tasty’ or ‘his behavior is chaste’ are elliptical: he who thinks that the okra is tasty thinks
that it is tasty to him or relative to a standard he has adopted. If so, there is no
disagreement between us about what’s in the gumbo. Like the suggestion that our
disagreement is “attitudinal”, the appeal to ellipsis makes false predictions. If our
exchange about the okra is nothing more than an effort in comparative autobiography,
why the strong intuition that we have said things that are incompatible?

2. Of the okra example, it has been said it does involve disagreement, but that in
this case the disagreement is “faultless” because claims like the claim that okra is
disgusting are only relatively true: Your opinion is only true-for-you, my opinion is only
true-for-me; when disagreement is over what is only relatively true, no one need be at
fault.

Something needs to be said about the notion of relative truth; the usual story goes
like this. Some things, of course, are absolutely true or false. It does not depend upon
your perspective as to whether Johnny Unitas played in a total of three Super Bowls or whether the boiling point of liquid oxygen is higher than that of liquid helium. But the truth of other things is perspective or judge dependent. Prime examples are “matters of taste”: when I say ‘cooked okra is tasty’ and you say ‘cooked okra is not tasty’, you contradict me, since you deny the very thing I say. But what I say can be true-from-my-perspective while what you say is true-from-yours.

The relativist says that propositions are true or false relative to a perspective (or relative to a world and a perspective). Absolutely true claims are the special, not perfectly general, case of claims that are true relative to every perspective. This means that truth is in an important sense indexical or perspectivial. A proposition \( p \) will be true or false only relative to a perspective \( v \); the truth of the claim \( p \text{ is true} \) will march in lockstep with that of the claim \( p \text{ is true} \) is true in perspective \( v \) iff the claim \( p \) itself is true in \( v \). Thus, the notion of truth is importantly different from the various notions true-in-MR’s-perspective, true-in-your-perspective, true in Smith’s perspective, etc., etc. The claims

\[ (O1) \quad \text{Cooked okra is tasty} \]

It is true that cooked okra is tasty

are relatively true: they are both true in my perspective, false in yours. But the claims

\[ (O2) \quad \text{It is true-in-my-perspective that cooked okra is tasty} \]

It is not true-in-your-perspective that cooked okra is tasty
are absolutely true.

Now, the proposal about the okra example was that in it you and I do disagree: there is a claim (that okra is tasty) that I believe and you disbelieve; our beliefs are incompatible in the sense that there is no situation –no perspective or pairing of a perspective and a possible world –relative to which both are true. But this doesn’t mean that either of us is mistaken, since your view is true-for-you, mine is true-for-me; our disagreement is “faultless”.

There are two *prima facie* problems with this proposal. First of all, the idea that we might disagree without one of us being mistaken seems untenable. Think of the matter from my perspective. I think –gosh, I *know* –that cooked okra is tasty. You disagree with me: you believe that cooked okra is not tasty. But that’s *false*. So you have a false belief. So your belief is wrong. So you should change your belief. If that’s not a mistake, nothing is. If being at fault is having a mistaken belief, you are at fault.

Secondly, it is not clear that we invariably *disagree* with those whose views on matters of taste are inconsistent with our own. I think that eating armadillo meat is disgusting but, I gather, elsewhere it is a delicacy. Do I disagree with those who think this? Do I think they have a false belief? I do not describe myself as in disagreement with those who are at great culture remove from me; I do not say they are mistaken. I am strongly disinclined to say that these others have false beliefs. But I would not say that I am mistaken either –eating armadillo meat *is* disgusting.
3. The relativist proposes that there are kinds of truth –truth-in-Smith’s-perspective, truth-in-Jones’-perspective, etc. –that have, as we might put it, less than universal pretensions. To say that p is true-for-Jones or false-for-Smith supposedly does not commit us to whether p is true or false “elsewhere” –it does not commit us, for example, to whether it is true-for-Robinson. It does not, the relativist says, commit us to whether p is true. Since notions like true-for-Jones and false-for-Smith have such humble aspirations, truth-for-Smith and falsity-for-Jones are able to cohabit, adhering harmoniously to (say) the proposition that okra is tasty.

The reason that the relativist’s story about faultless disagreement is worrisome is that the various notions of truth-in-a-perspective are related to the notion of truth; and the notion of truth, even when understood relativistically, does seem to have universal pretensions. Truth-in-Smith’s perspective is connected to truth: every instance of

(S) It is true that S iff it is true-in-Smith’s perspective that S

is true in Smith’s perspective.² More generally, and speaking a little roughly, every instance of

(T) It is true that S iff it is true-in-my-perspective that S

² This and the claim I am about to make about the next displayed schema need to be qualified in light of paradoxical sentences and ones, like applications of vague predicates to borderline cases, that are neither true nor false.
has the status of a logical or conceptual truth, since each instance of (T) expresses, in each perspective, something that is true. That the notion of truth has universal pretensions I take to be a fact about the way it functions in our ordinary discourse and thought: to say that one of your views is not true is invariably critical, invariably to suggest that there is something wrong with the view.

This sort of reproach is central to the notion of mistake: When I think of your view as false, I think your belief mistaken; when I think your view mistaken, I (typically) express this by saying ‘what you think is false’. The simple minded definition of disagreement, when combined with the relativist view as just developed, is in conflict with all this. If it is true-for-me that okra is tasty, it is true that it is tasty, false that it is not. If, then, you believe that it is not tasty, you have a false belief.

All this may seem to make the relativist’s position somewhat quixotic, quite independently of any talk of faultless disagreement. For it may now seem that if a relativist says that one of his beliefs is true but only relatively so, he will be under pressure to contradict himself when discussing others’ beliefs. Here is why.

Say that X’s belief is sound when, from X’s perspective, its object is true; say that X’s belief is well-supported when it is true in X’s perspective that the belief has whatever one adds to true belief to turn it into knowledge. Suppose, now, that I say that p is true but only relatively so. Then presumably I could know that I know p and also know that your belief that not-p was sound and well-supported. Since I know p, I know p is true and that you are making a mistake. But how can I think this? Do I think my own perspective’s judgment about p to be superior to yours? If so, shouldn’t I think that your perspective’s judgment about p to be superior to yours? If so, shouldn’t I think that your

3 I qualify this since there are cases (vagueness, believing the paradoxical, for example) where I might deny your view.

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judgment about $p$ is defective, and so you don’t have sound, well-supported belief? Do I think my own perspective is no better or worse than yours in its judgment about $p$? Then why think I know $p$? Why, for that matter, think that $p$ is true as opposed to indeterminate? How can I coherently think that I am right that $p$, but your contrary belief is in central epistemic senses just as good as mine?

Actually, I don’t think it’s hard at all for the relativist to answer these questions. Forget relativism for a moment and think about everyday conversational give and take. Observe that conversants have a certain amount of leeway as to whether some of the utterances in a conversation are true. At least this is so if anything like David Lewis’ account of accommodation and ‘conversational score’ is correct. Famously—and, I think, correctly—Lewis noted that whether an utterance of ‘France is square’ or ‘Mary is rich’ or ‘Sam is furious’ is true may—within limits, of course—turn on whether the utterance is accommodated in the conversation. That is, whether such an utterances is true it depends (within limits and all else being equal) on whether the utterance is treated as true. If, for example, I say ‘Mary is rich’, and I am not pushing the concept of wealth beyond its outer bounds, and my utterance is allowed to pass as true, then, all else being equal, my utterance is true. That we are able to “make truth” in a conversation via assertion and accommodation, I would say, is a result of the fact that we leave the contours of our concepts fluid so that their bounds can be adjusted to meet the exigencies of our interests.

Note that such contextual adjustment of a concept’s extension is by and large independent of considerations about whether treating an utterance as true will further the interests that govern the conversation. You may say ‘France is square’ in a conversation

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in which we are trying to find good examples of familiar squarish things to teach geometry to eight year olds; if I accommodate you, what you say is true. That doesn’t mean that, given our goals, it was a good idea to accommodate you; perhaps other standards for what counts as square would work better to give the students a sense of how a rhomboid differs from a square.

All this I take to be common ground among a variety of theorists. A certain sort of relativist takes part of this common ground – that utterances of ‘France is square’ or ‘Mary is rich’ may vary in truth across conversations – and combines it with intuitions about (dis)agreement to construct an argument for relativistic content. This relativist notes that there are cases in which ‘Mary is rich’ is accommodated in one conversation, ‘Mary is not rich’ is accommodated in another, and in which we would report those in the different conversations as disagreeing about whether Mary is rich. If they disagree, they presumably contradict one another; reasonable accommodation implies that each speaks truly. Positing relativistic content explains how disagreement and mutual truth are possible.5

Note that the common ground that motivates the relativist also gives him a way to respond to the worry that the relativist picture is unstable. Conversations are generally conducted with certain goals, and the mere fact that everything said in a conversation is true (and on topic) does not guarantee that the conversation achieves its goal. Our conversation about France and the square had as a goal finding a way to teach geometry; the adoption of a particular criterion of squareness not only made the comment ‘France is square’ true, it also contributed, perhaps not as well as it might have, to an attempt to

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5 For discussion see my ‘Contextualism and Relativism’ (Philosophical Studies 2004) and When Truth Gives Out (Oxford University Press, 2008.)
achieve our pedagogical goal. We can criticize the standard adopted –criticize the
making-true of ‘France is square’ –without denying that it was made true in the
conversation. For the picture here is one on which the mechanism that fixes whether a
utterance or a belief is true or false (here, conversational accommodation) is by and large
independent of the evaluative pressures that might lead a person in one conversation to
say that there is a better way to think of being square or being rich than the way people in
another conversation are thinking of it. There is nothing incoherent about thinking all
the following: (A) one way to think about squareness or wealth is the way those people
are thinking of it, and thus (B) what they say, when they say France is square or Mary is
rich, is true relative to their way of looking at things; but (C) in fact France is not square
and Mary is not rich: their way of thinking of shapes and of wealth are not the best ways
to think of them, not even given their purposes in speaking. Telegraphing the point:
Tinkering with someone’s way of conceptualizing things might improve the way they
think about the world. That this is so does not imply that their conceptual apparatus
doesn’t allow them to think truths before the tinkering.

4. Suppose we accept relativism about claims of matters of taste. What should
our verdict be on the question, Do you and I disagree about okra? Well, you say,
obviously our verdict would have to be that we disagree. Isn’t the point of relativism
about matters of taste to allow us to say that in a case like that of the okra, you contradict
me when you say ‘okra isn’t tasty’? Contradictory belief implies disagreement. End of
discussion.
I’m not so sure. Consider a case that has nothing to do with relativism. Suppose you see John sit and believe that John is sitting; suppose your near-twin in a nearby world sees John stand and believes that John is standing, not sitting. Your belief and your near-twin’s belief are incompatible. But you do not disagree. Why isn’t there disagreement here? The fact that you can’t argue about it seems neither here nor there—that doesn’t stop us disagreeing with the dead. Rather, there is no disagreement because there is no circumstance relative to which it is sensible to evaluate both your belief and your near-twin’s. It is silly to evaluate your twin’s belief in the actual world or your belief in your twin’s world.

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6 Here I am in agreement with John MacFarlane, “Relativism and Disagreement” (Philosophical Studies, 2007) who uses an example like this (as well as one like that of Kavalier and Clay below). There is overlap between MacFarlane’s view and my own of disagreement, though they are distinct. I won’t here compare them here.

Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne criticize this sort of example because they think that, since one of the objects in the example is non-existent, there can’t be any disagreement in the example:

…even if we unrestrict our quantifiers as far as possible, the [claim that each of two individuals in different worlds accepts some proposition P] does not entail that there are two individuals that accept P. After all, on the most standard metaphysical picture, there is no use of ‘everything’ so unrestricted that ‘everything that exists actually exists’ comes out false.

See Relativism and Monadic Truth (Oxford University Press, 2009), 64.

Perhaps it is true “on the most standard metaphysical picture” that ‘everything that exists actually exists’ can’t be understood as false. But we all perfectly well understand and, outside of the metaphysics class, think ‘there are more things that we can (and do) talk about than exist actually”; it’s hard to see how this could be true without the sort of relaxation in which Cappelen and Hawthorne refuse to engage. More importantly, the example in the text and the one following it are really devices to make vivid the fact that we all grasp immediately the ideas that beliefs with the same content may be about different situations and, when they are, we do not take them to disagree.

Note in this regard that even those who think that nothing exists but the presently existing would describe modern dentists, who think that men and women have the same number of teeth, as disagreeing with Aristotle, who thought that women had fewer teeth in men. We are quite capable of seeing whether one existent and one non-existent belief do or do not agree or disagree with one another.
Another example. Suppose we are “relativists” about tensed discourse. That is: suppose that we hold that a tensed sentence without explicit temporal indicators – a sentence like ‘John is standing’ – expresses the same proposition at different times. On this view, the proposition that John is standing is “temporally neutral”, and is true at some times (the ones when John is standing), and false at others (the ones when he is not). This is a kind of relativism insofar as it entails that some claims are not “absolutely true”, but true only relative to something that varies within a world. Now, we would not say that Kavalier disagrees with Clay if Kavalier believes at midnight ‘New York is quiet’ while Clay believes at noon ‘New York is not quiet’. But if one ascribes temporally neutral content to ‘New York is quiet’, the simple definition of disagreement seems to imply that they disagree.

In each example individuals “from very different circumstances” believe something to be true in their own situation, but not necessarily true of other situations. Your beliefs are “aimed” at the actual world, not at counterfactual ones; your twin’s beliefs are “aimed” at his world, not ours. Someone who believes things whose truth can change in an instant need not “aim” his beliefs beyond the time of believing. In the case of you and your near twin it does not make sense to evaluate your beliefs at a single world because neither belief is ‘aimed at’, ‘directed towards’, or ‘intended to be about’ a world other than its own.7 Something similar is true of Kavalier and Clay’s temporally

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7 Another way to make the point: beliefs (in the sense in which I am using the substantive ‘belief’) are individuated in terms of both their content and the situation (or set of situations) at which they are “aimed”. Thus, if we identify the content of Kavalier and Clay’s beliefs (each believes the temporal proposition that New York is quiet), we do not automatically identify their beliefs – which are, in the example, distinct because they are about different situations.
neutral beliefs. Each, of course, would have, or could be charitably ascribed, an intention to represent not just the instant of their thought but the time immediately surrounding that thought. But Kavalier is not thinking about the further future and Clay is not thinking about the long passed past.

Both an attitude and its content may be evaluated for truth relative to any circumstance whatsoever. If we simply ask of a content p and circumstance i Is p true at i?, questions about whether it is sensible to evaluate p at i do not arise. There is nothing about the proposition that John is standing, or that New York is noisy, that makes it about one possible world or point in time instead of another. But if we ask of a particular individual’s particular belief and a circumstance i Is this particular belief true at i?, questions may well arise about whether it is sensible to evaluate the token attitude at the particular circumstance. A particular attitude –my belief or your desire, say–bears special relations to particular circumstances. My belief was formed in my situation and is supposed to be about it, not about the way things are in another world. It is, as we might say, responsible to the way things are, not to ways things might have been. When we assess my belief as true or false, we are interested in whether it is true or false of a circumstance at which “it is aimed” or to which it is responsible. And to say that my belief is mistaken is to say that it is not true at a situation to which it is responsible.

There is a certain amount of affinity between the view I am developing and the view taken in Parts I and II of Francois Recanati’s Perspectival Thought (OUP, 2007). Our main difference is that I think there to be principled reasons for denying that the content of simple tensed sentences (or of the simple thoughts of toddlers or even higher animals) is temporally neutral. For discussion see ‘Temporalism and Eternalism Revisited’ in Volume 2 of my Meaning in Context: Collected Papers (OUP, forthcoming).

8 Which is not to say that one will get a truth value relative to any circumstance – vagueness or (perhaps) the absence of an object may scotch the evaluation.
Though your near twin’s belief is (actually) false, he is of course not mistaken; if it is quiet in New York when Kavalier thinks it is quiet, he is not mistaken, even if when we assess his belief, it is as noisy as all get out all over the Big Apple.

A believer believes “for his own case”: he finds himself in a particular situation; it always makes sense for him to ask whether his belief is true or false relative thereto. One’s beliefs are always responsible to one’s situation. There are occasions on which a belief can be said to be responsible to situations other than the situation in which it was formed.

Suppose that you think Mary is beautiful, while I think you’re wrong: your criteria for beauty, as I see it, are defective and you should not think that Mary is not beautiful. In this case, I think that your belief ought be evaluated relative to my criteria. Indeed, I think that you ought to change your criteria in certain ways—I think that the claim about Mary ought to be false-for-you; it ought to be false from your perspective. In this case, there is a straightforward (non-theoretical) sense of ‘responsible’ in which, as I see it, your belief about Mary is responsible to—it needs to answer to—my criteria of beauty. If we think about this example as does a relativist about beauty judgments, we can describe it so: there is a situation—a possible world and perspective (on beauty)—relative to which it is appropriate to evaluate both my belief and your contrary belief; there is, as, we just put it, a situation to which both beliefs are responsible.9

Pretty much everyone will agree that at some level, this accurately describes the typical case in which you and I describe ourselves as disagreeing about Mary’s beauty. In such cases we have different criteria for beauty; these lead us to make different

9 I am using the locutions ‘belief b is responsible to situation s’, ‘it is appropriate to evaluate belief b relative to situation s’ as synonyms. I elucidate their meaning below.
judgments about whether Mary is beautiful; each of us thinks that the other’s criteria are
deficient and should be changed so that the other’s judgment is in harmony with his own.
What not everyone will agree with is the relativist’s idea that the disputed criteria are to
be seen as “part” of the “circumstances of evaluation” (that relative to which the belief is
ture or false), instead of being “part” of the concept of beauty. But there are good
reasons for thinking of matters this way.

The relativist (as I see it) holds that it can be a fact that someone is beautiful or
something is tasty only in virtue of the way the person or thing interacts with the
standards, expectations, and psychology of an individual or group. It can be a fact that
someone is beautiful or that something is tasty, but it is a fact “only from a particular
point of view”. In some sense, everyone (save those who think there is a single absolute
standard of handsomeness or tastiness) agrees with this claim, since everyone (save
absolutists) agrees that different judgments of beauty may be responsible to very different
standards. The spin the relativist puts on this is in locating the subjective factor involved
in judgments of taste “outside of the judgment” itself, making it a part of the situation
that makes the judgment true or false. Keeping the subjective “outside” of the judgment,
locating it “in the situation” the judgment concerns, allows us to think of ourselves as
agreeing (or disagreeing) in the most literal sense about such judgments. One might, of
course, allow for genuine disagreement by insisting that there is a single standard of
beauty that makes beauty judgments true or false absolutely. It seems an advantage of
the relativist view that it can preserve the idea of constancy in what we judge true or false
in the cases that concern us without postulating objective standards that go beyond those
on which we might eventually converge in unconstrained argument.
5. When we actively disagree about matters of taste, we try to change one another’s judgments, but we do not merely try to change each other’s judgments. Typically, your judgments about what is tasty or who is beautiful will be accurate relative to your own standards. In arguing with you, I strive to change the standards governing your judgments, assuming that once they are amended, faulty judgments will fall in line. And in such argument we are—or should be—open to altering our own standards in response to what our opponent says.

Thus, if we are not completely at loggerheads when we argue about beauty, fine wine, or bad beer, one or both of us will typically change our perspective on the matter under discussion—we change our reactions and standards and thus come to see things in a way somewhat different from the way we saw them before. Such arguments are thus attempts to construct a “joint perspective”, in which we are (more) in agreement about the matter under discussion (than we were when we began). Thinking of truth as perspective relative, active disagreement thus involves an attempt to construct a situation—the world combined with our common perspective—to which our disagreement is to be responsible. When we assess people who do not at the moment actively disagree as being in a state of disagreement, we presuppose that they should want to reach agreement on the relevant issue, and thus presuppose that there should be a situation—the actual world as viewed through their (eventual or ideal) joint perspective—relative to which it is appropriate to evaluate their beliefs.

Thinking of disagreement in these terms helps make sense of some puzzling facts about our attitude towards differences over matters of taste. People often give voice to
something like the following complex of attitudes when they discuss matters of taste: (i) they often think that their own claims --that Eddie Izzard is funny, that Gloria is attractive, that bestiality is disgusting --are incompatible with the claims made by others --that Izzard is not funny, that Gloria is ugly, or that bestiality is a healthy way to be at one with nature. But (ii) they are loathe to say that their own claims are true, or that those of the other are false; they seem in some cases --particularly ones in which the other’s standards are at some cultural distance from their own --to be uncomfortable saying that they disagree with the other. But notably, (iii) people who react in this way about some differences in judgment about humor, beauty, and the abyss will also judge other differences of opinion about humor, beauty, or mores as ones in which the other is just flat out wrong.

The pattern I just described is widespread. An account of judgments of taste should help us understand it as coherent. A first step towards understanding the pattern, I think, is to understand judgments of taste as the relativist would have us understand them: as judgments which are not to be evaluated as true or false simpliciter, but as true or false relative to a situation, a world and something supplied by an individual or group --a set of standards, an individual perspective, call it what you will.

The second step in seeing these reactions as coherent is to understand our assessments of error and disagreement as being sensitive to whether we think there is reason to assess judgments relative to a single situation --relative to the same world and standards. If I judge that there is no reason for your standards for beauty or tastiness to overlap with mine about a certain case, I am not going to judge you as being in error if at that point your views are contrary to my own. If I think your standards of beauty or
flavor needn’t agree with mine own, I will be loathe to say that in the relevant cases we genuinely disagree.

The final step in making sense of this pattern of reactions to matters of taste is to accept that whether it makes sense to evaluate two people’s beliefs in terms of a single situation is contingent on a number of factors that may vary across cases. One factor is whether or not there is, or ought to be, a commitment on the part of both people to accept a common set of standards for making such judgments. It is perfectly possible for there to be good reason for you and me to agree on whether Gloria is attractive, while there is no reason for my judgment of Gloria to converge with some third party’s judgment. You and I usually make very similar judgments about this sort of thing, backing them up with similar reasons; if we diverge about Gloria, surely one of us is in error. But Third Party may be from a different culture.

It is a philosopher’s fantasy that everybody should agree about everything, at least when all the evidence is in and everybody has reasoned correctly. I would say it is only a fantasy. The way to understand our attitude when we say that something “is just a matter of opinion” and resist pronouncing views opposed to our own as false is by analogy with the way in which we understand our attitude towards your near-twin’s belief, in his counterfactual world, that John is standing. There is something bizarre about saying that his belief is false. There is something even more bizarre about saying that it is true. His belief is true-for-his-own-situation. It is not supposed to be, and need not be, true-for-our-situation. Likewise, the right view to have about someone else’s views on matters of taste is that sometimes The Other’s view doesn’t need to be true from all perspectives. Unless we are in a mood to be argumentative –unless we are prepared in
effect to *demand* that The Other’s view converge with our own—it is simply inappropriate to evaluate his views as true or false. We need, if we want to drag truth into it, to limit ourselves to evaluations that make their relativity explicit. From your perspective, by your standards, relative to your tastes, it is false that okra is tasty.

What I’ve said thus far leaves it open, as to what we should say about whether you and I disagree, when I judge that okra is tasty or Mary is not beautiful, your judgment on the matter is incompatible with mine, and there is not reason for our standards to converge in this case. As I see it, we have contrary inclinations about this. As noted above, we tend to be reticent about cases like this—we tend to say things like ‘we don’t really disagree’ or ‘it’s ok for you to think about it that way’. But of course we also feel a pull to say this is a case of disagreement—hence the attraction of the simple definition of disagreement as simply a matter of contrary belief. Why is this?

6. The default assumption in a conversation is that all the conversants are in the same situation or are at least working towards making this so.\(^1\) That is, the default assumption is that if we don’t share the same standards, if our individual perspectives aren’t calibrated so that we should accept the same claims about beauty, tastiness, etc., we are at least working towards making this so. We might even hypothesize a “rule” of conversation such as: so far as possible, and all else being equal, make sure everyone in the conversation is in the same situation. One virtue of this hypothesis is that many of Lewis’ remarks about conversational scorekeeping seem to flow from it—for example,

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\(^1\) This section owes a lot to comments by Gideon Rosen.
the principle that all else being equal and within limits, one ought to accommodate others’ uses of gradable adjectives.

But though the conversational default is that we have, or at least are working towards, a shared standard, we of course often find ourselves in a conversation where standards differ. In some of these conversations, we recognize that there is no reason for us to strive for agreement. In these cases, we recognize that some of our beliefs have a limited validity: they are, and need only be, true for us.

How should we speak about our beliefs, if we find ourselves in such a situation? As I see it, the normal use of ‘true’ presupposes (‘pragamatically presupposes’, in Stalnaker’s sense) that what is true is true not just for us but is, or should be, true for those we are talking to or thinking about. It is because of this that the notion of truth can play the role I pointed out earlier in this paper, when I observed that in our ordinary discourse and thought to say that someone’s view is not true is invariably critical, invariably to suggest that there is something wrong with the view.

But though ascribing in conversation (unrelativized) truth to a claim presupposes that one’s conversational partners share standards that underwrite the ascription, such an ascription only presupposes this –it doesn’t entail it. A presupposition is only that, and it can be suspended, at least in thought. I can recognize that there is no reason for you to agree with me about the tastiness of okra, and thus recognize that though your view is only true for you, you aren’t making a mistake in holding it. In this case I will recognize that your view is false, but will refrain from asserting its falsity.

Just now I asked, How should we speak about our beliefs, when we recognize that there is no reason for those who differ with us to accept them? The answer is: Best in
such cases to limit ourselves by thinking the relevant beliefs true for ourselves. While it would not be thinking something false to think our belief flat out true –after all, that’s just a way of thinking that it is true for ourselves –thinking of a belief in this way carries a presupposition that we know is, in this case, erroneous. And this, indeed, is how common sense tends to talk in these situations –we hedge, and say that the relevant belief is valid or true for me but not for you, that it’s true from my perspective but not from yours.

Something like this seems to be true of our talk of disagreement. For me to say that I disagree with you is pretty much invariably a prolegomena to my trying to alter your standards so that (if you judge in accord with them), your opinion falls in line with mine. It is more or less practically impossible for me to voice disagreement with you without implying that you need to change your view. If I say

(Y) You think that okra is not tasty, but I disagree,

this implies that (I think that) okra is tasty. It implies that it is true that okra’s tasty, false that it’s not. So, if I say (Y), I imply that you think that the okra is tasty, but as a matter of a fact, it’s not. And so I am committed to your thinking something false, to being in error.

What does this tell us about disagreement? It tells us that there are two things we convey, when we say that we disagree with someone. It tells us, as I see it, that there are two kinds of disagreement, kinds that are normally found together, but which come apart in the sorts of cases with which are currently preoccupied. To say that we disagree is,
indeed, to say that there is a p such that one of us believes it, and the other believes its negation. But in saying this, we almost invariably presuppose that there is reason for both of us to hew to standards that converge so far as the object of disagreement is concerned. If you prefer: we almost invariably presuppose that there ought be a single standard bearing on the case at hand on which we agree. It is the obvious lack of any reason for convergence, in the case of you and your near twin, that explains why we find ludicrous the suggestion that you and your twin disagree. It is the lack of any standard of taste to which we and those at cultural remove ought conform—and thus the lack of a situation to which both of our beliefs are responsible—that explains our reticence to use the idiom of disagreement when describing great differences of taste across cultures.

It is tempting—I am tempted—to call cases, in which we have contrary beliefs that ought to be evaluated relative to a common standard, cases of real (as opposed to merely superficial) disagreement. That, after all, is what we do call them, when we say such things as that people with differing standards of taste don’t really disagree.

7. When I first suggested that something was missing from the simple story of disagreement—on which it is simply a matter of believing or asserting incompatible things—I spoke of someone's belief being "responsible" to situations (i.e., to worlds and sets of standards) other than the one in which it was formed. The picture such talk invokes is one on which there is a relation, responsibility, that token beliefs bear to some but not all situations; disagreement is a matter of x and y differing over p—one believes or asserts it, the other believes or asserts its denial—and there being a single situation to which their token beliefs or assertions are responsible.
This is a tidy picture, and it allows a tidy story to be told about why you and your near twin, and why Kavalier and Klay, do not disagree even though they have incompatible thoughts. But it is not the picture that I drew in the last section. There I moved from speaking of beliefs being responsible to a situation to speaking of there being reason for evaluating a particular belief relative to the same standards. I did this in good part because the tidy picture is simply wrong. There can be reason for us to come to the same view about a matter even when there is no view about the matter to which there is reason for us to come. So it goes in much of the disagreement we have about how to organize our social world. We ought, for example, come to consensus about how exactly to reduce the deficit. I rather doubt that there is some consensus about how exactly to do this that we ought to reach.

What does this tell us about the argument with which we began, according to which faultless disagreement, even for the relativist, is impossible? That argument went as follows. To say that people disagree is to say that they have incompatible beliefs. To say that someone is at fault in believing p is to say that while they believe p, p is not true. Thus, a disagreement between x and y is faultless provided that there is a p such that one of x and y believes p, the other believes not p, and each belief is true. If we are relativists, of course, we will assess fault relative to a particular situation, a pairing of a world and a perspective. But no situation could make a claim and its denial true. So even if we are relativists, we must say that faultless disagreement is impossible.

11 It is clear, I hope, that in speaking in this way, I intend to be speaking of reasons "on balance". We can most likely always come up with a reason to evaluate someone else's beliefs relative to our own standards and world —for example, it makes the evaluation relatively easy for us to perform. 12 Barry Smith and Isidora Stojanovic made this point in discussion of earlier versions of this paper.

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I have in effect rejected both the definition of disagreement and the definition of fault on which this argument is based. Even if you believe p while I believe its denial, there may be nothing wrong with your believing p so far as I am concerned, for there may not be a reason for us to agree about p. To say that x is mistaken in thinking p is to say something apt just in case there is on balance reason for x to change his situation (by changing his perspective, by changing the standards associated with his concepts) so that, relative to his perspective, p is true. And even if we reserve the term disagreement for what I have called 'real disagreements' –cases in which two people have inconsistent beliefs where there is (on balance) reason for them to adjust their perspectives so that they agree on the issue in question–we cannot conclude faultless disagreement is impossible. For, as just remarked, it may be that there is on balance reason for us to agree on some matter, but no agreement on the matter such that there is on balance reason for us to reach it.

8. What of you, me, and Jones’ unchaste behavior? Part of the problem the example poses is whether you are able to believe that Jones’ behavior is chaste, unchaste, both, or neither. Arguably, you can’t believe that it’s chaste and you can’t believe that it isn’t. Consider what it is about Jones’ behavior that leads me to label it unchaste and leads you to think “yes, that certainly counts as unchaste.” What Jones did presumably has a non-normative description –suppose that B abbreviates it –which is more or less analytically tied to lack of chastity, so that the argument

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13 I am here correcting some of the things I said in the first sections of Chapter 5 of *When Truth Gives Out*. In particular, I hereby retract the claim that there is no sense in which a disagreement can be faultless.
I.  That is B

So, that’s unchaste

functions, at least for those who are willing to describe things as chaste or otherwise, as a valid argument.  But, of course, ‘unchaste’ is a term of condemnation –to say that something is unchaste is to say that it is, in some significant sense, bad.  So the argument

II.  That is unchaste

So, that’s bad

functions, at least for those who are willing to describe things as chaste or otherwise, as a valid argument.14  But if these are valid arguments, you aren’t in a position to believe that Jones’ behavior is unchaste, since (I will presume) you see nothing wrong with what Jones did –and so will deny that what he did was bad.  Neither can you say that it’s false that his behavior is unchaste, since you are just as good as I at seeing when ‘unchaste’ is aptly applied, and thus know that if you deny that the behavior was unchaste, you will also have to (falsely) deny that it was B.

Some say only argument I is valid:  if Jones’ behavior is B, then it must be unchaste, since the conditions for applying chaste are “naturalistic”; but, it’s said, it is

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14 Those familiar with Michael Dummett’s account of ‘Bosche’ and other epithets will recognize the pair of validities here as being of the sort that Dummett takes to be definitive of such epithets.  See Frege:  *Philosophy of Language*  (Harvard University Press, 1973.)  As I read Williams, he takes the same sort of pattern to be associated with thick terms.
only a “conventional implicature” of the claim that something is unchaste that it is bad.\textsuperscript{15} If we say this, of course, then you must say that Jones’ behavior was unchaste, and the apparent disagreement you had with me over this was only an appearance. Even putting that embarrassment to the side, I don’t think this is the best way to think about the matter. The idea that argument I but not argument II is “meaning constitutive” of ‘unchaste’ is undermotivated. Surely there’s nothing about the behavior of the speakers who actually use ‘chaste’ that would make one of these arguments more central to the meaning of the word than the other.

One might at this point suggest that in fact neither argument is valid, because there is something amiss with the concept of chastity. After all, you stopped using ‘chaste’ and ‘unchaste’ because (a) the concepts those words express in some sense presuppose that sexually provocative behavior is bad, but (b) you came to think there wasn’t anything wrong with such behavior. So the concept suffers from something like presupposition failure, and so is defective.

Even if we say this, we need to distinguish two attitudes that you may have towards my thoughts about chastity. There is the case in which you think someone’s thick vocabulary is “fine within his own world”, though you reject its application to your own case. You may feel that as long as I don’t try to impose my views of chastity and the like on others, there’s nothing amiss with my living in a world where the mini-skirt vexes the sons of men and Lady Gaga plays the role of Lilith. If this is your attitude, then though

\textsuperscript{15} Tim Williamson takes something like this approach to epithets in ‘Reference, Inference, and the Semantics of Pejoratives’ in J. Almog and P. Leonard, eds., \textit{The Philosophy of David Kapan} (Oxford University Press, 2009). It is not completely clear that Williamson is committed to the validity of the analogue of I in the case of epithets: He holds, I believe, that it is a necessary truth that whoever is a German is a Bosche, but it is not clear whether he thinks this is a \textit{logical} truth.

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you reject my way of looking at the world for yourself, you are tolerant of my views on chastity. On the other hand, you may think my views of provocative behavior to be just as misguided in “my own world” as anywhere else. In this case you are intolerant of my views. Both cases are cases of disagreement in some sense, but surely our disagreement is in some way different in the two cases.

The “relativist” account outlined above is in a position, I think, to draw the relevant distinctions. When you are tolerant (but dismissive) of my views of chastity, you allow that they are true-from-my-perspective, but refuse to evaluate them as true or false yourself. In this case, your attitude towards the claim that Jones’ behavior is unchaste is of a piece with the view of someone who says, of a borderline case of baldness, that the person isn’t bald, but he isn’t not bald either: You recognize that someone who says, of the person, that he is bald indeed says something, but you take what’s said to be neither true nor false; you reject the relevant claim. But when you take someone to be a borderline case of baldness, you take the person to be someone who could be called ‘bald’: one would not change or even abuse the meaning of ‘bald’ were one to classify the borderline case as definitely bald. Analogously, for you to be tolerant of my taking Jones’ behavior as unchaste is for you to recognize me as saying something, to reject it as neither true nor false, but to also allow that my way of thinking of behavior and sexuality is in some important sense possible. You think that one could think of the matter in my way; one could lead a life in which it would be true that Jones’ behavior, being provocative in the way it was, was wrong. On the other hand, when you are intolerant of my judgments of chastity, you in effect refuse to recognize those judgments

as having even the limited validity of being accurate in my world. In this case, your attitude towards the claim that Jones’ behavior is unchaste is somewhat like the attitude of someone who says of a paradoxical sentence that while it says something, what is said is neither true nor false and could not be.¹⁷

9. Consider something we all agree about—cruelty, say. We know what it is to be cruel—a person who finds pleasure in causing unwanted, unnecessary pain is cruel. And we know what is to be said about such a person: they are bad. Only a philosopher—and, I venture to say, not many of them—would deny that either of the arguments are valid. True, the Humean must deny the validity of one of these arguments. Probably he will say that ‘cruel’ means something like finds pleasure in causing pain and is bad because of it, and insist that because of this argument III isn’t valid. Most other philosophers will say that the Humean’s definition is right, or close enough, but will say that some claim along the lines of a person who finds pleasure in causing pain is bad is

¹⁷ Why not in this case simply say that my judgments about chastity are false? Because saying that will saddle you with denying that the relevant behavior is Bish, at least given the validity of argument I. That argument I is valid for those who are willing to use ‘unchaste’ is defended in the next section.
necessarily true. Thus, these philosophers think, both arguments are valid. The Humean in his heart, I suspect, wants to think so too.

Only a philosopher –but in this case, I fear, too many of them –denies the validity of arguments I and II. On the face of it, such a view –that III and IV are valid, but cognate arguments involving thick notions that the philosopher does not care for are invalid –seems just plain odd. We know that it is possible to roll the descriptive and the normative together in a single concept so that a pair of arguments like III and IV are both valid. But if we can do this, what stops those like the Catholic of an earlier era from doing the same thing with somewhat different normative and descriptive elements, forging the validities in I and II?

The philosopher responds that not even God can make an argument valid if its premises do not entail its conclusion. Indeed. But under what conditions does one claim entail another?

The concepts of being chaste and being unchaste “have purchase” only if you have a particular kind of perspective on the world. It is not just that things seem unchaste if –and only if --you look at the world a certain way; things are unchaste if –but only if – you look at things in these ways. If we want to draw a quasi-formal picture of how the concept of unchastity works, we will represent it as a rule which, given a situation –a world and a perspective --picks out a set of objects, the objects of which it is true at that situation that they are unchaste. Since things are only unchaste or otherwise if one takes a certain perspective, the rule will be silent –it will be undefined --when applied to some situations: From your perspective, there is no saying whether Jones’ behavior is chaste or
unchaste. And so while it is true-in-my perspective that Jones’ behavior is unchaste, from yours it’s neither true nor false that the behavior is so.

Now, what is it for p to entail q? Well, p entails q if, of necessity, q is true when p is. But what is necessary may depend, in some sense, on where one is. In some sense of ‘necessary’ it is now necessary that there was a sea battle in the South Pacific in the 1940’s, though it was not necessary in the past that this was so. The standard way to represent this sort of variability in necessity is to think of the situations at which we judge things true or false to be related in a particular way –the relation is usually called accessibility–so that p is necessary provided that it is true at every accessible situation. We are thinking of situations as being pairs of a possible world and a perspective, and so, when we speak of a claim being necessary, we must mean that it is necessary when considered from a particular world and perspective.

It is natural to think that from my perspective, in which behavior is chaste and unchaste, the only perspectives that are “accessible” are ones in which behavior is seen as –from which behavior is chaste and unchaste. So a world and perspective is accessible from the actual world and my perspective, only if it is one relative to which, when a bit of behavior is like Jones’ –when it is Bish –it falls under the concept unchaste. Likewise, from my perspective, the only circumstances that are accessible are ones which involve a perspective from which the unchaste is bad. Sitting where I am sitting, arguments I and II are valid. From your perspective, of course, claims about chastity and unchastity are defective –they aren’t even true or false. From your perspective, the arguments fail.

The reason the philosopher resists saying that arguments I and II are valid is that she either rejects the notions of chastity and unchastity herself or can see that someone
might be in a position where they reject them—and thinks rejecting the notions shouldn’t force one into logical incoherence. But perhaps what the philosopher should do is recognize that there is sense of valid argument on which admitting that arguments I through IV are valid does not commit one to any particular normative outlook.

Continue to think of concepts as relativists would have us think of them. They are representable as Kaplanian characters: functions that take us from a possible context of thought or speech to possible worlds intensions. On this way of thinking of concepts, you and I might share the concept of being rich or being sexually provocative even though our concepts don’t apply to exactly the same things. Think of perspectives as something that each person has, with a person’s perspective determined in part by the concepts she has, in part by the way in which she wields them. Given a perspective $V$ and an argument $P_1, \ldots, P_n; \text{thus}, C$, whose vocabulary expresses only concepts contained in the perspective, we may ask whether the argument’s premises entail its conclusion—whether, that is, every world in which all the premises, interpreted relative to the perspective, are true is one in which the conclusion is as well. Say that in this case the argument is valid relative to the perspective. Arguments I and II are valid relative to my perspective. Indeed, they are presumably valid relative to any perspective that has the concepts of being unchaste, being bad in the relevant sense, and the concept of B-ish behavior. But for you to allow this is not for you to say that the arguments are valid—i.e., valid relative to your own perspective.¹⁸

¹⁸ Note that this definition relativizes validity to a set of concepts. This is necessary to insure that validity, on the current approach, is transitive. (Thanks to Gideon Rosen for pointing out that a previous definition was defective in this respect.)
Various sharpenings of the notion of perspectivial validity are possible; I will mention one. I imagine that two Catholics might share all their concepts, but differ about how seriously sinful certain acts are. They might, for example, differ about whether lack of chastity was a venial or a mortal sin. There is, after all, a certain amount of slack in the dogmatic boundary between what sends you to hell and what sends you to Purgatory. In this case, whether we judge the argument

That is B-ish.

So, that is a mortal sin

to be perspectivally valid turns not just on the set of concepts the perspective contains, but on how the perspective sharpens them. An arguably more useful notion of validity will identify perspectival validity with validity that is assured once we adopt a set of concepts. Say that two perspectives share a conceptual scheme if their occupants have precisely the same set of concepts, and call the set of concepts shared the perspectives’ conceptual scheme. Then an argument is valid relative to a conceptual scheme $S$ provided that the argument is valid relative to any perspective that shares $S$.

We were worried that your thinking that the concept of chastity might be ‘ok for Richard, though there’s nothing wrong with what he calls “unchaste behavior”’ was incoherent because it was committed to the idea that arguments I and II were valid. But if the relevant notion of validity is the sort just introduced, there’s no incoherence here at all. For present purposes, and very informally, to say that an argument is valid in a conceptual scheme is to say that anyone who has that scheme must recognize the
argument as valid. And I can say that this is so even if I don’t share your conceptual scheme.

Return now to matters of taste. I could insist that you are mistaken about the okra; I could say that you and anybody else who thinks that okra isn’t tasty is mistaken. I could say this about some matters of taste but not others: I could, for example say that contrary opinions about food flavors are not mistaken, but opinions about (say) whether certain novels are good of their kind are the sort of thing on which we should converge, so that those who disagree with me are just wrong.

Something like such a “mixed picture” seems in fact attractive in the case of normative claims. One wants to say that some such claims are true, period; those who deny them are wrong. Other normative claims, perhaps, have a limited sort of soundness, in the way that claims about chastity perhaps are sound for those who accept them. I take it to be an advantage of the way of thinking of these matters that I have been sketching, that it can make sense of this idea.

10. I close with an issue that may seem at some remove from those I’ve been discussing: our apparent and perhaps permanent inability to give a complete account of the semantic properties of languages with modest expressive capacities. Tarski despaired of giving an account of truth-in-L in L itself when L has modest abilities to discuss arithmetic; he thought this possible only in another, expressively stronger language. If so, we can never say all there was to be said about truth in the languages we speak. Kripke showed that there is a way to define true-in-L within L (given that truth-in-L is a gappy sort of property). But on Kripke’s view simple facts about truth –e.g.,
that a (strengthened) liar sentence isn’t true – cannot be expressed in a language embodying Kripke’s account: we are left (as he put it) with ‘the ghost of the hierarchy’. Contextualist accounts of truth – on which what propositions there are shifts across contexts so that what seems paradoxical turns out not to be – concede that we will never be able to say anything completely general about truth. And so on. One can, of course, surrender to paraconsistent approach. Personally, I’ve always thought that positing true contradictions is the lazy man’s way of doing philosophy.

What does this have to do disagreement? Well, consider my definitions of disagreement and mistaken belief. The definition of ‘mistaken belief’ can’t be completely general, given a view of truth like Tarski’s, Kripke’s, or the contextualist, invoking as it does the notion of a belief’s being false at a circumstance. On these views, we can’t say anything perfectly general about truth. Something similar is true of the definition of disagreement. In this case, the problem is with the use of an undefined notion of negation (we disagree only if one of us believes p, the other not-p, and… …). On views on which we have a hierarchy of truth (or truth-like) predicates, there is not a univocal notion of negation (or conjunction, or disjunction, or…), since these notions are to be explained in terms of truth (or truth-like) properties. So if we have a never ending hierarchy of truth (-like) predicates, it would seem that we can’t say anything completely general about negation, and thus, we can’t, if we want to give a definition like that at the end of Section 6, say anything perfectly general about disagreement. Arguably this isn’t a problem given the purpose of my definition, which was to persuade you that there is more to disagreement than semantic incompatibility of beliefs. But it does leave one wondering whether it is in fact possible to say anything illuminating about disagreement.
I think there might be. Suppose that you claim p and I dissent. I put myself forward as thinking that there is good—indeed, conclusive—reason for you and I not to believe p. Why not say that that is what disagreement is? That is, for me to disagree with your claim or belief p is for me to think that there are conclusive reasons against our believing p. In particular cases, of course, one can point to the reason. You think that (say) snow is black. I think it’s not. According to me, that—that snow is not black—is a conclusive reason for out not believing what you believe. Thus we disagree. This sort of story would seem to be one that we could give in any case of disagreement.19

Whether this suggestion does the trick, of course, depends on whether the notion of there being conclusive reasons (for or) against believing a claim is appropriately independent of notions like truth, appropriateness, and the like. I don’t see that we need to drag in the notion of truth or allied notions in explaining what it is for one thing to be a reason for another. There are connections between the notions of truth and of being a reason for believing, but they are not definitional. I am not 100% sure that notion of a conclusive reason can be explained without dragging in the notion of truth, but I think a case can be made for this, since a conclusive reason might be said to be one that would withstand any argument.

If this proposal is on the right track, then maybe we can at some level theorize in complete generality about disagreement. What we can’t do is define disagreement once and for all in semantic terms. Which isn’t to say that we can’t give piecemeal accounts in

19 I do need to say here that when I (for example) deny a claim p, I thereby give a reason against the belief that p. This means I can’t identify reasons with (say) true propositions. Given that I think that there are many more facts than truth propositions, I’m not too perturbed.
semantic terms, for example about what it to disagree about something that has truth conditions. I’m not sure anything more is needed.\textsuperscript{20}

Appendix. The account of disagreement offered above presupposes that we may have good reasons to give up (what we know to be relatively) true beliefs, a claim that strikes many as preposterous. What follows defends this claim. In the course of this, it tries to cash out the metaphors of a 'joint perspective' and of a belief being responsible to a situation, as well as to say something substantive about the conditions under which people with different perspectives on a claim ought to change their perspectives so that (relative to their new, joint perspective) the claim has the same status for both of them.

1. Responsibility to a situation. A situation is a world paired with a perspective. Informally, a person’s perspective is constituted by those facts about her in virtue of which she looks at and conceives of the world in a particular way. Among the things that make up a perspective are a particular location and orientation in space and time, a particular kind of sensory apparatus and consequent sort of sensory experience, an emotional sensibility, a social and historical situation, an idiosyncratic collection of tastes and preferences for activities and experiences, and a particular set of concepts. For the

\textsuperscript{20} There is a strain in recent semantics –one that includes Dummett and Brandom –that should find the suggestion I am making here welcome. The theorists I have in mind think that various facts about “use” are in some sense primary in characterizing meaning. I am not sure that I would go as far as saying that such facts are primary –just as central to an account of meaning are the facts that determine representational properties, and I rather doubt that representational facts are to be reduced to or even supervene upon facts about ‘use’. Still, I think those of us who worship at the Church of Representationalism might consider the possibility that there are broadly semantic properties –dissent is one of them –about which something general can be said, but what there is to say, in complete generality, will turn out not to invoke “narrowly semantic” notions like truth and reference.
purposes at hand, we will think of perspectives as simply sets of concepts, sharing a perspective as something that happens to the extent that our concepts overlap.

In developing the requisite notion of a concept, I begin by borrowing a page from the relativist’s book.\(^{21}\) The relativist thinks of the contribution of a predicate to a thought —call such a thing a *notion*—as something that has an extension only relative to a situation —that is, relative to a world and a perspective. The notion of being tasty, for example, maps my situation \(<@, p>\) to an extension —this extension being the rule that assigns to each time \(t\) the things that, as they are in \(@\) at \(t\), are tasty relative to \(p\); it maps your situation to an extension that measures tastiness at \(@\) relative to your standards, etc., etc.\(^{22}\) For the most part, I will represent notions and their kin via such functions. But this is only a representation. A notion is perhaps best thought of as a (somewhat fuzzy) collections of principles and practices, typically spread across a culture or society, which guide application and inference.

I assume that each notion has a *core*, a particularly pared down version of the notion. Intuitively, a notion’s core is the (somewhat idealized and certainly fuzzy) collection of principles and practices that determine what objects definitely do and

\(^{21}\) The pages I’m borrowing are from Chapter 4 of my *When Truth Gives Out* (Oxford UP, 2008.)

\(^{22}\) Strictly speaking, we want notions to determine not just an extension (a function from times) but an *intension* (a function from worlds and times). It would add needless complication to the exposition to recognize this, so I suppress it. (Furthermore, I often suppress the fact that applying a notion to a situation yields a function from times to extensions, speaking as if it if just delivered a set of objects.)

The text is misleading in a certain way. Notions are typically partial: what we get when we apply a notion to a situation and a time is usually not an exhaustive partition of the domain into two groups (those of which it is true and those of which it is false). When we apply a notion \(N\) to a situation \(s\) and then to a time \(t\), we get a pair of sets, \(<N^+_s, N^-_s>\), the first the objects of which \(N\) is true (relative to \(s\) and \(t\)), the second those of which it is false. Typically the two sets do not exhaust the domain. Above, talk of extensions must be understood as talk of functions from times to pairs of such sets.
definitely don’t fall under it.\textsuperscript{23} I represent cores as I do notions, as functions from situations to extensions. A notion $N$ typically maps different situations in the same world to different extensions (it maps your situation to things that, relative to your standards, are $Ns$, mine to those that are so relative to my standards, etc.). A notion $N$’s core, on the other hand, treats every situation (in a world) the same, for the core tells us who \textit{must} be taken to be an $N$ (or not) by anyone who uses the notion correctly. A notion extends its core: if $u$ is in the extension of $N$’s core relative to situation $s$ and time $t$, $u$ is also in the extension of $N$ relative to $s$ and $t$.\textsuperscript{24}

By a \textit{concept} I mean a particular notion sharpened (and thus extended) in a particular way by a particular individual’s standards. My concept of tastiness, for example, is the result of combining the notion of tastiness that you and I share with my way of sharpening it; your concept of tastiness is the result of combining the common notion with your standards. Unlike a notion, whose extension varies across situations in a world, a concept has the same extension at every situation in a world, and thus can be represented as a function from times to sets.\textsuperscript{25} As suggested above, my perspective can be identified, for present purposes, with the set of my concepts so conceived.\textsuperscript{26}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Actually, to determine reference a core will have to somehow involve causal relations of speakers to an environment.
\item Obviously there will a good deal of indeterminancy in the core of most notions whose extensions can shift across contexts.
\item Strictly speaking, concepts like notions only have extensions relative to situations; it’s just that the extension doesn’t vary across situations.
\item I am using \textit{notion} and \textit{concept} more or less stipulatively here, and don’t mean to be faithful to ordinary or philosophical usage. Some people who distinguish between concepts (which are shared) and conceptions (which are idiosyncratic) seem to intend something like the distinction I am drawing between notions and concepts (though they may want to resist the mild relativism I have built into the notion of notion).
\item Some elaboration: Suppose Naomi and Didi have different views of what level of income is necessary to be a rich New Yorker, and each view is a reasonable one. Then May 2011. v.9 Do not cite or reproduce without written permission. 38
\end{enumerate}
Our official definition of a situation is a possible world \( w \) and a perspective \( p \).

But a situation can also be thought of as a set of propositions –the set of propositions that are true at \( p \) and \( w \). Thinking of situations in this way, there will be always be considerable overlap between your situation and mine: all the propositions whose truth is determined (simply) by the world we occupy are part of each of our situations. It is true in both our situations that \( 2+2=4 \), that uranium chloride boils at \( 1657^\circ C \), that Luis Tiant got a hit in his first at bat in the 1976 World Series. Our situations differ in what relatively true propositions are true at them. It is true in my situation that okra is tasty, false in yours.

Situations so conceived are –as maximal, consistent sets of propositions --like possible worlds as ordinarily conceived. They are \textit{unlike} possible worlds ordinarily conceived in that it is possible to ‘move’ from one situation to another, simply by changing the ways in which one conceptualizes the world. Such movement can be, in the most literal sense, progression –we can \textit{improve}, relative to our goals, projects, and interests, on the way in which we think about matters, adjusting our concepts so that we have a better overall world view. For example, when we were deliberating about how to teach the children geometry, we were in a situation in which France was square; when we came to think this a bad to way to think about the matter, we progressed to a new situation in which France was not square. Relative to our goals –to get the kids to be able
to distinguish squares from rhomboids and pentagons, and to do it by offering (correct) examples of countries that had various geometrical properties – this was an improvement.

If this example is sound, it is possible for us improve our cognitive position by giving up some of our true beliefs. Of course, when we do this, we don't do it by trading them in for *false* beliefs; what we do is simultaneously revise our standards *and* our beliefs, so that (very roughly speaking) each belief we drop is made false by the revision in standards, while each belief adopted is (one which was false but is now) made true by the revised standards. Obviously there are limits to this sort of improvement. In particular, the truth value of some beliefs can't be altered by a change in standards. Change your standards however you like; you can't change them in such a way that you make it trure that Luis Tiant never played baseball. You can, of course, change the standards you associate with the word 'baseball', or with 'played'; if you do this radically enough, you might manage to make the *sentence* 'Luis Tiant never played baseball' express a true belief. But then you've changed the meanings of the words in that sentence so much that it no longer says that Luis was never a player.²⁷

We can explain what it is, for a belief to be responsible to a situation in terms of the sort of conceptual improvement just described. Intuitively, your belief that p is responsible to my situation provided that your interests and goals would be best served if those of your concepts relevant to p were to be (relevantly) like mine, in particular, if their contours were to assign p the truth value it has in my situation. That is: if you don’t

²⁷ I assume that we all have an interest – a compelling interest – in believing only truths. And so I assume that the sort of conceptual improvement I am trying to explain here is one that just can't be achieved by coming to believe the denial of any claim that is absolutely true.
agree with me about p, you could achieve conceptual improvement by altering your conceptualizations so that you did.

In somewhat more detail: Fix on a particular domain D about which we have opinions – teaching geometry, the nature of wealth, the care and feeding of pets. The domain will be characterized, in part, by a particular set N of notions that figure centrally in our thoughts about it. Assuming I have opinions about D, I have beliefs involving N and goals and interests to which these beliefs are relevant. Now, when I form a belief involving notions in N, I (try to) form it in accord with the way I have sharpened its members. And this sharpening, and the beliefs formed in accordance with it may be less than optimal, given my goals and interests: where S is my sharpening of N, there may be an alternative sharpening S’ of N such that, were I to form beliefs about D in accord with it (and maintain the general level of accuracy of my beliefs), my (actual) goals and interests would be better served than they are by forming beliefs in accord with S.  

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28 The geometry example is supposed to be an example of this: our interests in teaching the children geometry are better served by our having high standards for squareness and forming beliefs accordingly than by having the standards we had at the beginning of the example and believing what we did. Other examples are given below.

I am sure this formulation requires considerable massaging. For instance: the text asks us to compare how my actual beliefs under S compare, in satisfying my interests, with the beliefs I would have, given simply a change from S to S’. Better, probably, to compare the beliefs I would have under S given that those beliefs were about the same propositions and more or less true in my situation with those I would have under S’, given the same restriction. Pursuing these sorts of issues would take us too far afield.

The phrase ‘form beliefs in accord with’ is in need of considerable elaboration. The idea is that we can (a) do something like abstract from the way a person has sharpened their notions and speak of the evidence the person has, and thus; (b) talk of how the person would form beliefs if the evidence were held constant but the boundaries of her concepts were shifted as they would be with a resharpening – the beliefs I would have in this case are the ones I have if I ‘form beliefs accordingly’, having retooled my concepts.
This sort of improvement is of course a matter of degree: There may be an S” that stands to S’ as S’ stands to S. And there may be an S*’s that also improves on S but is incompatible with S’, and an S** standing to S* as S” stands to S’. And so on. What we have, then, holding my goals and interests fixed, are sequences of improvements on my current way of conceptualizing the relevant domain –a sequence <S, S’, S”,”>, another <S, S*, S**, …>, and so on. These in turn determine sequences of situations, all based in my current situation, and obtained from it by making the appropriate changes in my conceptual repertoire.29

Think of the situations in these sequences as maximal consistent sets of propositions. Let p be a proposition about domain D that person X has beliefs about. Let C be the set of the sequences based in X’s actual situation and constructed as in the last paragraph. Say that a proposition p is fixed by such a sequence if there is a member s of the sequence such that p is in s and in every member of the sequence succeeding s. Say that p is fixed for X, relative to his goals and interests bearing on D, if it is fixed by every sequence in C. The propositions that are fixed for X about a certain domain are those that X would believe if his concepts were optimal (relative to his interests) for thinking about the domain and his beliefs were (given those concepts) true beliefs about the domain.30
They are the propositions about the domain that –given X’s interests and a desire to believe truths --X ought to believe. For my belief that p to be responsible to a situation s

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29 A wooden way to do this would be (for example) to stat with my current situation <@, p>, replace S (which is in p) with S’ to get an improved perspective <@, p’>, and then do the same sort of thing to this new perspective with S”, and so on. This is probably too wooden a way to generate the relevant sequences, but here is not the place to look for a better account.

30 And he was so opinionated about the domain that for every p about the domain, he believed p or its negation.
is (for s to contain the world in which the belief was formed and) for s to be a situation that reflects the way I ought to be thinking about matters, when I think p –either s is a situation in which p is true and p is fixed for me, or s is a situation in p is false, and not-p is fixed for me.

2. Conceptual Improvement. Our concepts serve our interests. Some of these interests are very general: we want to be able classify efficiently and correctly; we want to be able to anticipate events that are important to us; we want to classify as do those with whom we share a language, so that we can understand one another. Some of these interests are quite specific, and tied to specific concepts; we generally want, for instance, a disease concept to be one for which there is a single syndrome s such that the concept applies to x iff x suffers from s. Given all this, as well as the idea that a notion’s boundary is to a certain extent adjustable to meet the demands of our projects, it should come as no surprise that conceptual improvement is possible. For suppose that there are different ways of refining a notion N’s extension while retaining that notion –so that those who apply the refined notion are still applying N. Such refinements may be more or less apt for our purposes. Conceptual improvement occurs when we adjust our concepts in ways that we would under any (maximal) improvement relative to those purposes.

Examples of this are easy to find. It may, for example, be left open by practice and theory what the precise contours of (say) a psychiatric notion like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder are. When this is so, different people or groups may sharpen it in incompatible ways. Each may be able to justify their own sharpening by appeal to the interests the concept serves. Each may criticize other sharpenings based on the interests
they think the concept ought serve: another sharpening may group several disparate kinds together; it may be too difficult to apply in practice; its application may involve noxious ideological assumptions; it might depart in ways difficult to understand from other sharpenings of the underlying notion. But if the notion can be sharpened in the way a group sharpens it, such criticisms, if sound, need not show that the notion is being misapplied; they may only show that the notion being sharpened could be better utilized, relative to the interests on which the criticism is based.

Conceptual improvement is improvement. But it is not improvement in the sense of getting one “closer to the truth” – at least not in any absolute, perspective independent sense. It occurs when you ‘move’ from one perspective to another, and thus from one situation (conceived of as a maximal consistent set of propositions to another). Your situation before your move is a maximal, consistent set of truths – it is the set of all things that are true relative to your situation. It is not just a total way the world could be – total in that, for every p, it includes p or its negation. It is the total way – from your perspective – the world is. It may be that your moving from your situation to (one more like) mine would be a conceptual improvement, but that is not because ‘there is more truth’ in my situation. Neither need such a move mean that the number of truths (or the number of ‘significant’ truths) you believe will increase.

Conceptual improvement is a matter of retooling the bounds of concepts so that they better serve our interests. This, it should be stressed, is not a matter of pretending that something falls under a notion when it doesn’t. It might be in my interest to be rich (for a 21st century resident of the Boston area); if my income does not reach even $50,

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31 Thus, a situation is not like the set of beliefs I have, for my beliefs about my situation – even my beliefs whose objects are relatively true or false – may be woefully mistaken. May 2011. v.9 Do not cite or reproduce without written permission. © Mark Richard Posted 30 July 2011
000 a year then –given that someone in Boston with my income just can’t count as rich – I cannot improve my situation in this regard by retooling my concept of wealth.

Conceptual improvement is a matter of changing one’s standards (or reactions or some other aspect of one’s perspective). But not every (beneficial) change that we might describe as a change in perspective counts as a conceptual improvement. A simple example: I find it hard to correctly classify the heights of objects on my left, but not on my right. If I need to execute a certain task, I may be much better off if I walk around the locus of the task so that what was on my left is now on my right and vice versa. This is a change of perspective, but not a change in my notions of right and left. The criteria—the (context invariant standards, if you like) --for whether something is to the right or the left (is it on this side of me or that one?) remain the same; the concept of left that I applied before I moved is the one I apply in my new situation. This contrasts with a case in which I reset the cut-off for being rich from a yearly income of $250,000 to one of $300,000.

I would be first to admit that sorting cases, as to whether they involve conceptual improvement, is a subtle matter. Consider the notion of being tasty. It is one that is tied in the first instance to the tastes of tasters –if I speak truly in saying that cilantro is tasty, that is because it presents itself to me (in the right sort of circumstances) as enjoyable to palate and nose. I might lose my taste for cilantro due to injury, so that it no longer presented itself as enjoyable in this way: before it had a pleasantly musty note; now it tastes like soap. If this happens, I will no longer speak truly when I say that cilantro is tasty. But this sort of change is not, I would say, a case of conceptual improvement, even assuming that the change is overall beneficial to me. At least it is not such an
improvement, given that what has changed is not how I judge a particular taste, but how the thing tastes. On the other hand, if I re-educate my palate so that the taste itself, which I formally disliked, is now enjoyable, that—if it benefits me in the right way—is conceptual improvement. As the example suggests, it may be in practice impossible to say in certain cases whether something is (simply) a case of conceptual improvement. Given the obscurity of questions about whether temporally disparate experiences are the same, this is to be expected.

Conceptual improvement is measured by one’s interests. One holds one’s interests fixed, and then asks whether retooling a concept’s boundaries would make one better off. Sometimes, I can improve my lot by dropping certain interests. This might change the extensions of certain of my concepts (e.g., act that would maximize the satisfaction of my interests), but this would not be a case of conceptual improvement.

However, there is a kind of “change in interest” that is relevant to assessing whether conceptual change is a conceptual improvement. You may, after all, assess my goals and interests as themselves defective. And if you do, then even if you grant that given those goals and interests my concepts are well-shaped to suit my interests, you may think that my concepts are defective and that I am thinking about things the wrong way. And it is arguably the case that what interests I have—and thus what shape my concepts ought to have—is itself a perspective relative matter. This would be so, for instance, if the shape of my concept of wealth was responsible in one way or another to the way incomes ought to be distributed among members of society, but the facts about how income ought to be distributed are not perspective independent. When this is so, whether
a disagreement is what I called above a real disagreement will itself be a perspectival matter.

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