

# Disagreements

He says ... she says ...

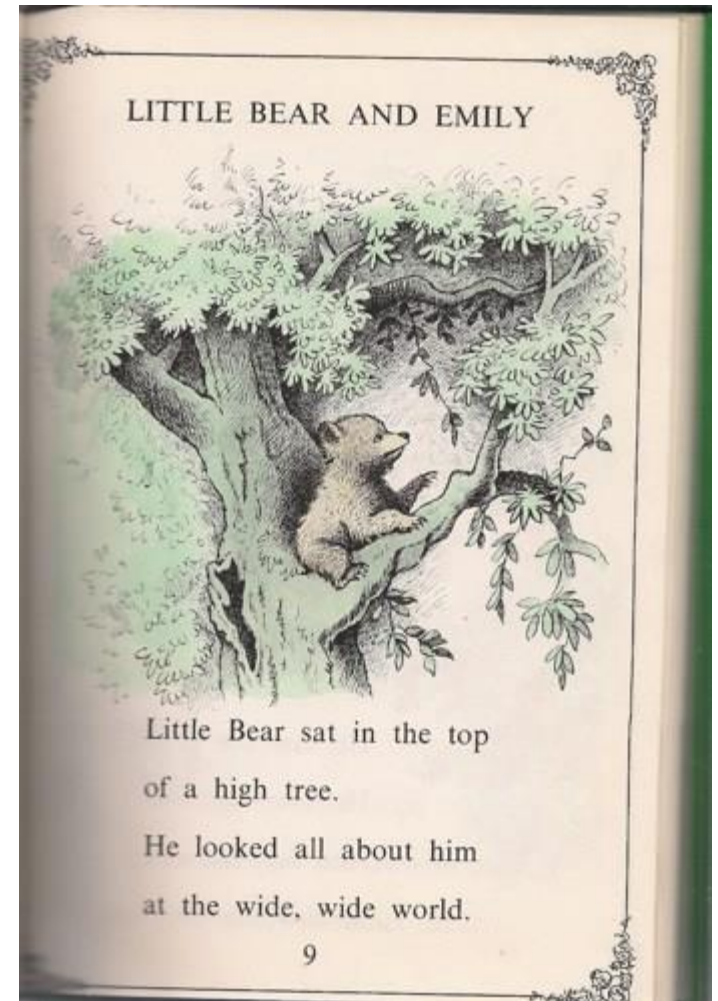
# Substantial vs. “merely verbal” disagreements

- A “merely verbal” dispute, or disagreement, occurs when two people agree on the facts but differ on how those facts should be *described* using words.
- E.g. Alice and Ben agree that Jake is 5’ 10” in height, but disagree about whether he is *tall*. They disagree only about the meaning of “tall”.
- A merely verbal disagreement is *superficial*, and should be quick and easy to resolve?

- A substantial disagreement is where people have incompatible opinions about the *world*, not just about language.
- E.g. Alice thinks that Jake is about 5' 10" in height, and Ben thinks he is more like 6' 1".

# Can Little Bear Fly?

- In one story, Little Bear climbs a tree. While on a high branch, he tells another creature that he can “fly down, but not sideways” (or words to that effect).
- Do you agree?





He began to climb down,  
and saw four little birds.  
“Look at us,” they said,  
“we can fly.”



“I can, too,” said Little Bear,  
“but I always fly down.  
I can’t fly up  
or sideways.”

# Substantial or merely verbal?

- Suppose man walks around a tree, and a squirrel is hiding from the man, so that he's always on the opposite side of the tree from the man. (Facing the trunk, of course.) Does the man *go around* the squirrel?



# What does “go around” mean?

- Since the squirrel always faces the man, the man is always in front of the squirrel, and never behind the squirrel’s back.
- But the man starts out north of the squirrel, and then moves west of it, then south, then east, and finally north of it again.
- It’s a merely verbal dispute.

# Substantial or merely verbal?

*Alex:* See that bus over there?

*Beth:* You know, I'm taking physics this term, and technically you can't see the bus, only the light coming from the bus.

*Chris:* My philosophy prof. says that we don't see light, or material objects. All we see are mental representations, in our own heads.



# Underlying real disagreement

- Sometimes a dispute may be focused on words, and so *appear* to be merely verbal.
- But, as we saw with definitions, our words aim to “carve nature at the joints”.
- So apparently verbal disagreements *may* really be substantial, namely:

***Where are the real joints?***

# E.g. Heckman on child poverty

- Suppose Heckman is arguing with another economist about whether a middle-class kid can experience poverty.
  - The other economist points out that the kid has his own 120 square foot bedroom, adequate nourishment, clothing, etc. He goes skiing at Whistler.
  - Heckman retorts that both parents work, he's often stuck in a lonely suburb, by himself, playing video games ...
- It appears to be merely verbal, as they mean different things by 'poverty'
  - But remember that Heckman talked about "*real* poverty". There is perhaps a substantial dispute about what kind of impoverishment is more harmful.

# Same-sex marriage

- E.g. on the question of whether same-sex couples can get *married*, is the dispute substantial or merely verbal? Is it just a matter of whether we *call* this type of relationship a 'marriage'?
- Many opponents of same-sex 'marriage' are comfortable with same-sex 'unions' that have the same legal status as marriage.

## **Underlying substantial issue:**

Do same-sex relationships and opposite-sex relationships have the same status with respect to God's purposes, human flourishing and well being, etc.?

Are they objectively similar in these respects? If they are, then the use of a common term 'marriage' is helpful and true. If not, then using that term is deceptive and misleading.

# Merely verbal?

*Alice:* Bjorn Lomborg has *refuted* the idea that we should spend money on reducing carbon emissions.

*Ben:* Rubbish. He has *argued against* that idea, sure enough, but not convincingly in my view.

A: Aristotle was, in my opinion, the greatest philosopher ever.

B: Are you kidding me? No one with such a low view of women can be called even a *good* philosopher, let alone a *great* one!

(N.B. Aristotle said that, although women have a “deliberative faculty”, and are so able to make rational choices, it is “without authority”, so that women require male supervision.)

A: Cars are safer than bikes. More cyclists than motorists are killed per mile of driving/riding.

B: Rubbish! Cycling is much safer than driving. When was the last time you heard about someone being killed by a cyclist?

C: Actually cycling's even safer than that, when you factor in the benefits of exercise. It protects you from major killers like stroke and heart disease.

A: Nice try you guys, but none of that stuff has anything to do with the *safety* of a vehicle. Everyone knows that the bigger and heavier a vehicle, the safer it is.

- Are they just arguing about the meaning of the word *safe*? Or is there a substantial disagreement?
- Here it may be a substantial dispute, as the real issue might be ***which risks are important?***
  - E.g. do we care about risks to others?
  - Should long-term health effects be considered in transportation choices?



# Part 2

Substantial disagreements

# Types of Substantial Disagreement

## 1. Factual disagreements.

- The parties disagree about the *facts*, i.e. matters than can be checked or verified, fairly easily.

## 2. Interpretative Disagreements.

- The parties may agree on the facts, but they disagree about the *cause(s)* of those facts.

## 3. Evaluative Disagreements.

- The parties may agree on the facts, and what caused them. But they disagree about whether this is *good, right, healthy, pleasant, etc.*

# Factual Disagreements

- Facts are true statements that can be directly verified.
- E.g.
  - the weather today
  - historical facts that are generally accepted and written in books (e.g. the date of the Battle of Hastings)
  - Empirical facts like the density of iron

# Interpretative Disagreements

Two people may agree on the “facts”, i.e. the data, or what can be readily observed or verified. But they disagree on *why* these facts exist, i.e. what *caused* them.

E.g. “I know she called you a goof. But she said it in fun, not to be mean.”

# Scientific disputes

- Scientific disputes are typically interpretative. The facts, data, observations, phenomena are agreed. The question is what is *causing* those phenomena.
- E.g. all scientists agree that the earth is warmer now than 100 years ago, but the question is what has *caused* this. In particular, is the rising concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere primarily responsible?

# Evaluative Disagreements

- Two people can agree on the facts, and even on the causes of those facts, but still differ about whether or not that is a *good thing*, i.e. whether or not it is:
  - Morally right
  - Healthy
  - Legal
  - Reasonable, beautiful, fun, etc.

3. I took my young son to the ER after he fell from the tree he was climbing. I told the nurse there that he'd had an accident, but she said firmly that it was a *preventable injury*. "Call it what you like," I replied, "as long as you patch him up".

Is this disagreement merely verbal? If not, then describe the underlying substantial disagreement, saying whether it is factual, or interpretative, or evaluative.

*Dave:* It's perfectly normal to be depressed now and again. A high percentage of people in our society experience depression at some point in their lives.

*Betty:* Even if depression is really as common as that, that doesn't make it normal. It just shows how our society screws people up."

Explain how this dispute *might*, at least, be merely verbal.



5. Identify the following substantial disagreements as factual, interpretative or evaluative.

(i) I feel a fluttering in my stomach. I'm in love!

-- No, that's just gas.



(ii) In 1654 Descartes completed his remarkable *Principles of Philosophy*.

-- Remarkable indeed, given that he died in 1650!

(iii) Of course I'm more successful than you, buddy. Just look at our houses, our cars, our clothes ...

-- Apparently you define success differently from me.

(iv) Greenland is one of the best places I've ever visited. The vast emptiness of the landscape, its austere, unforgiving peaks, unending ice fields ...

-- What, no nightclubs? Sounds like hell on earth!

(i) “Women can do anything men can. Look at me, for example. Even though I have two kids, I’m also a research chemist with an international reputation and over 80 published scientific articles.”

-- Yeah, you can do a lot. But can you remember the names of your kids’ friends?

(ii) “After Australia’s helmet law came in, the number of head injuries to cyclists was reduced. Cycle helmet laws do work.”

-- Well, the number of injuries *did* go down, but the amount of cycling went down even more. All the law did was deter people from cycling.”

(iii) “Evolutionists cannot explain why there are rocks with human and dinosaur fossils seamlessly mixed together.”

-- “Oh Gosh. The thing is that there just *aren't* any such rocks!”



(iv) “In the evolution of life on this planet, as revealed in the fossil record, we see the accumulation of random, purposeless changes, filtered by natural selection. Humanity is a mere accident.”

-- “I don’t agree. On the contrary, I see evolution as a process of unfolding, or development, with humans as the final outcome. The fossils record the precise plan that God has ordained.”

4. “In 1938 Neville Chamberlain deceived the British and Americans. “I have returned from Germany with peace in our time”. Ha! Less than a year later the Nazi tanks rolled over Poland.”

-- “I don’t think he deceived anyone. It seems to me that he was an earnest, trusting fellow who thought the Anglo-German declaration would hold.”

Explain how this dispute *might*, at least, be merely verbal.

## Part 3

Are evaluative statements always subjective?

# Are evaluative statements always subjective?

- If someone says “Strawberry ice cream is better than chocolate” then this surely expresses their personal preference. It is not objectively true, or false.
- But what if someone says “Torturing innocent people for fun is morally wrong.” Is this just a subjective preference as well? Or is it true (or false)?

# Are evaluative statements always subjective?

- We say that a person with diabetes is unhealthy. Is this just a subjective preference? Who says what amount of sugar is “right” for human blood?
- We say that certain inferences are rational, logical, or valid. Is this just a subjective preference?
- (I.e. the terms *healthy* and *rational* are also evaluative, or ‘normative’.)
- Is *beauty* subjective?

# Normative subjectivism is paradoxical?

“Neuroscientists at MIT have recently shown that the old philosophical idea of a *justified* belief is an illusion. There’s no neurological basis for it at all.”



By Frits Ahlefeldt

# Normative subjectivism is paradoxical?

*Professor:* All interpretations of a text are equally valid. The “author’s intention” is a myth.

*Student:* Ah, very amusing, professor. I love the ironic way that you lampoon the view, while appearing to support it.

*Professor:* No, no. You misunderstood me. I was being serious!



# Does subjectivism support moral reform?

- All moral systems are arbitrary social constructs. They didn't descend from heaven, written on tablets of stone. *So they can be changed.* This is a good thing to realise, because many traditional moral systems are racist and patriarchal. They allow and even promote injustice, and are in desperate need of reform.
  - See the inconsistency?

# Arguments and Truth

- An argument is one way to persuade people to accept your view of some matter (called the *conclusion* of the argument).
- But there are other ways to persuade people, such as bullying, emotional appeals, and so on. Why use rational argument?
- Rational arguments are preferable because (under the right conditions) they lead to beliefs that are *true*, and which constitute *knowledge*.

# What is truth?

- **Pragmatic theory:** A “true” belief is one that *works*, in the sense that it helps us to achieve our goals.
- **Coherence theory:** A “true” belief is one that coheres with, or “fits nicely” with, our other beliefs about the world.
- **Correspondence theory:** A “true” belief is one that matches, or corresponds to, the real world.

# Pragmatic theory

- Criticisms:
  - Sometimes a false belief “works”. E.g. a belief that the river god will be angry if we put sewage in the river. This keeps the water clean for drinking, so that the village is healthy.
  - Sometimes, when a belief works we think that it does so *because it's true*. But even in that case, working well and being true are different concepts.

# Coherence theory

- Criticisms:
  - There are many different coherent belief systems, but only one belief system (at most) can be true.
  - For example, crazy people are often very consistent. Their beliefs fit together very well. But their beliefs are still false.

# Correspondence theory

- This is the “common sense” theory of truth.
- Criticism:
  - The correspondence theory is extravagant, and naïve. We have ways of telling whether or not our beliefs are true. But how can we know that our beliefs “correspond to reality”? We have no independent access to this alleged “reality”, other than through our beliefs. Beliefs can be compared only to other beliefs.

# Part 4

Positive relevance and discrimination

# Valid argument

- The very best arguments are (deductively) *valid*. (We also say that the conclusion is a *logical consequence* of the premises.)
- A valid argument is one whose conclusion is absolutely certain, assuming the premises. Any rational person who believes all the premises (with certainty) must believe the conclusion (with certainty) as well.



# Positive Relevance

- In a good argument, the premises are (as a minimum) *positively relevant* to the conclusion.
- This means that coming to believe the premises makes the conclusion more probable than it was before. We say that that the premises *support* the conclusion.

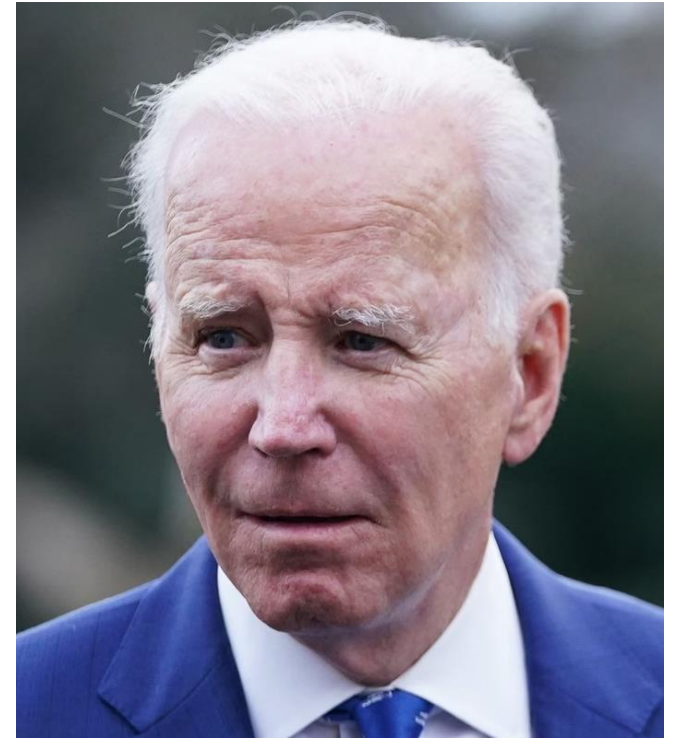
# Examples

Smith is 75 years old

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∴ Smith has retired

This is not *valid*, since some people are still working at 75 (e.g. some US presidents).  
But the premise *supports* the conclusion.



Smith is a woman

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∴ Smith will not make a good engineer

Here, the premise is of little or no relevance to the conclusion, especially if Smith has an engineering degree, or good grades in math. The argument is not strong.

Smith has failed the standard physical tests for firefighters (lifting, carrying, etc.)

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∴ Smith will not make a good firefighter

	<i>A is positively relevant to</i>	<i>B ?</i>
(i)	Mike Grier is a black player in the National Hockey League	At least one professional hockey player is black
(ii)	I have no more than 4 eggs	I have fewer than 6 eggs
(iii)	The sex of crocodiles is determined by temperature	Taller people earn more, on average, than shorter people
(iv)	John F. Kennedy was assassinated by the FBI	Martin Luther King was assassinated by the FBI
(v)	Not every parking space is full	At least one space is not full
(vi)	Everett died this morning	Everett will run a marathon next month
(vii)	We're having pancakes for breakfast	We're having a cooked breakfast
(viii)	Qin's theory is false	Qin's theory is rejected by all relevant scientific authorities
(ix)	Alice was abducted by aliens	Mike was abducted by aliens
(x)	Fred has been convicted of theft	Fred has stolen something

# What is “discrimination”?

- In the literal (older) sense, discrimination is **judging some things to be better than others**.
- For example, judging one wine to be better than another, or awarding higher marks to one student than another, is (always) discrimination.
- But, in present usage, “discrimination” usually means *unjustified*, or *incorrect* discrimination – discrimination on irrelevant grounds.

# When is discrimination unjustified?

- Discrimination is unjustified when the grounds of negative (or positive) judgment are irrelevant to the case being considered.
- E.g. a job applicant who's unable to walk. This is relevant to (e.g.) construction work, but of little or no relevance to admin or office work.

- “In order to be a full professor in the philosophy department, you have to be at least 5’ 9” tall.”





# Vague vs. probable beliefs

- A *vague* statement or belief is one that is true in a wide range of cases.

E.g. there are 20-30 people in the room.

- A probable belief is one that is held tentatively, not with certainty.

E.g. “there are perhaps 24 people in the room”

6. Identify the following sentences as expressing either approximate/vague beliefs or probable beliefs, or both. Write 'vague', 'probable', or 'both'.

(i) Fred is some kind of medical professional.

(ii) I think Fred is a physiotherapist.

(iii) My best guess is that we'll need 3 or so large pizzas.

(iv) Jill is perhaps the only one here who will get to the second round.

(v) The meeting will run for about half an hour.