

# The Basic Components of Agreement

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**Abstract:** Disagreement has garnered attention in a variety of academic disciplines, but its counterpart agreement is deserving of much more attention than it has received. This paper begins by reviewing some of the existing literature directly discussing agreement. Inspired by these conversations, I then provide a typology of basic types of agreement followed by a more general discussion of its nature. The aim of the paper is to provide conceptual clarifications and a framework for discussing and analyzing agreement wherever it may be found.

**Résumé:** Le désaccord a attiré l'attention dans une variété de disciplines académiques, mais l'accord mérite beaucoup plus d'attention qu'il n'en a reçu. Cet article commence par passer en revue une partie de la littérature existante qui traite directement de l'accord. Inspiré par ces conversations, je propose ensuite une typologie des types d'accord de base suivie d'une discussion plus générale sur sa nature. L'objectif de cet article est de fournir des clarifications conceptuelles et un cadre pour discuter et analyser l'accord, où qu'il se trouve.

**Keywords:** agreement, congruency, deep agreement, propositional attitudes

## 1. Introduction

Agreement plays an important role in many domains. While law is perhaps the most obvious, it is also central in several philosophical sub-disciplines, especially argumentation, ethics, epistemology, and political philosophy. In this paper, I focus on human agreement, or agreement involving people. I make this specification because there is also an 'a-human' or 'extra-human' sense of agreement that involves consistency. For example, we may speak of grammatical agreement or mathematical agreement where two

sides of an equation are equal, or two processes may work in parallel or complementarily, or they may be accidentally coordinated. In a number of these cases, agreement could again be an important area of investigation, but that is not the sort of agreement I am concerned with here.

Nevertheless, I hope that this paper remains valuable for scholars in varying disciplines. Because the insights I would like to propose stem from the philosophical perspective, I will be looking for the basic components of agreement and thinking about what it means to be in a state of agreement. Searching for a characterization at the root should mean that these insights can then be applied, advanced, and developed within other fields where agreement plays an important role. The main aim of this paper, then, is to provide an improved analytical framework for describing and studying agreement wherever it may be found.

The field of argumentation is a fitting place to start looking at the notion of agreement because it is a main discipline that has investigated agreement's furthest but also oddly closest sister concept, disagreement. Agreement is disagreement's closest and furthest concept because it seems to be the yin to the yang of disagreement, tucked in right beside it, in some ways its opposite but while also sharing symmetrical features.<sup>1</sup> A secondary goal of this paper is thus also to comment on the nature of the relationship between agreement and disagreement including what if any space lays between.

I proceed as follows. In the next section (section two), I review some of the discussions that have explicitly addressed foundational aspects agreement thus far. Building from the insights these works provide, in section three, I present five types of agreement that seem to be basic in the sense that at least one is involved in any given instance of agreement. Section four offers some observations on the nature of agreement along with a pro-

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, several authors start their work from an assumption that the two concepts are close despite them being antonyms. For example, Michael Gilbert's (2000) OSSA paper discussed below is titled "Agreement/Disagreement." In the legal field, Svein Eng (2013) provides an analysis of "Dis/Agreement," and in philosophy, Max Kölbel (2014, p. 101) distinguishes "two notions of agreement (disagreement) in belief."

posed definition, followed by a discussion of mixed agreements and the space between disagreement and agreement. I conclude in section five by pointing to research that could be developed by argumentation theorists, philosophers, and those interested in agreement generally.

## **2. Characterizations of Agreement**

Agreement is notably undertheorized in nearly every domain. While the notion of agreement makes appearances in several theories of argumentation, in almost every case, disagreement continues to garner most of the focus. In this section, I present an overview of works that explicitly highlight the importance of agreement.

### *Jackson and Jacobs*

One of the earliest works in argumentation to highlight the role of agreement comes from Sally Jackson and Scott Jacobs' (1980) discussion of the "Structure of Conversational Argument." They characterize organized conversations as essentially occurring via adjacency pairs, for example, question-answer, request-grant/refusal (1980, p. 252), that maintain a preference for agreement. The preference for agreement creates "a general presumption for agreement in the absence of good reason to do otherwise" (1980, p. 253). For example, when a request is made, they contend there is a structural preference for the request to be granted. Dialogical argumentation, then, is a way to repair a disagreement to return the conversation to the state of agreement.

### *Gilbert*

In his 1997 book, *Coalescent Argumentation*, Michael Gilbert presents "a mode of argumentation that is based on agreement rather than criticism" (1997, p. XV). To date, Gilbert's work appears to provide the most thorough engagement with the notion of agreement in the field. Against the critical attitude promoted in most critical thinking courses, Gilbert argues that the aim of coalescent argumentation is bringing "about an agreement between two arguers based on the conjoining of their positions in as many

ways as possible” (1997, p. 70). The importance and value of his shift from focusing on disagreement to focusing on agreement, along with his explication regarding how to go about doing so cannot be understated. In the 1997 book, however, Gilbert still largely relies on our intuitive understanding of what agreement is.

In a paper presented at the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation three years after the release of *Coalescent Argumentation*, Gilbert offers seven agreement concepts meant to demonstrate the complexity of the range of agreement (Gilbert 2000). The list begins with “consensus,” which is noted to be the strongest form of agreement. He then identifies whole-hearted, general, and partial agreement, along with agreement in principle, grudging acquiescence, and compliance, which can roughly be read as descending in strength, before reaching “empty agreement,” the weakest form. In that paper, Gilbert is careful to note the complexity of agreement, not just in degree but also in type and the ways in which it operates in human interaction in general and human argumentation specifically. To my knowledge, this paper remains the most expanded work explicitly focused on the notion of agreement, and, as such, it provides a rich soil for the topic.

Finally, in *Arguing with People*, Gilbert (2014) does an excellent job of reminding<sup>2</sup> us of how agreement both permeates and bookends argumentation: Agreement is needed to begin argumentation but is for many also the end that is aimed for in argumentation.

### *Black*

The work of philosopher Oliver Black is not well cited in argumentation circles, but his book entitled *Agreements: A Philosophical and Legal Study* (2012) could be well utilized in the field. In that book, Black defends his offer-acceptance theory of agreement. He states, “Roughly put, the thesis is this: X and Y agree with each

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert presents a “reminder” because the idea appears earlier in the pragmatodialectical theory through discussion of agreed upon starting points as well as agreement as the resolution of a difference of opinion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004). See also Tindale (2015, p. 69).

other if X makes Y an offer which Y accepts” (Black 2012, p. 4). Given the legal component of his study, his thesis is especially illustrated through the offer, acceptance, and performance of legal contracts.

Black’s theory has many merits, especially for those interested in practical reasoning. As he admits, however, he only offers one characterization of a sufficient condition for agreement, and more can and should be said.

### *Aikin and Casey*

Most recently, Scott Aikin and John Casey have begun discussing what they see to be the “Problem of Agreement.” The heart of their thesis is that “argument, understood in the sense of a critical discussion, or persuasion dialogue, need not involve disagreement” (Aikin and Casey 2022a, p. 4). They are concerned with what seems to be a hyper focus on disagreements at the expense of studying agreements that work flawlessly. Looking at arguments we agree with is valuable, they contend, because it can help us reinforce standing agreements and find better reasons for what seem to be established conclusions.

Inspired by and making use of many of these insights,<sup>3</sup> I will now focus on providing some analytical tools to assist with the analysis of agreement where it may be found. To do so, I separate some of the ideas in the above noted and other works, so that we might be able to view and study them individually before, which can help provide some analytical clarity when considering instances of agreement in their more natural, but also messier, real-life contexts.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to these works, the works cited in footnote one, and the footnotes below, other works have also proved valuable. However, most of these works overlap substantially with the works I have reviewed in this section or offer highly stipulative/context-dependant discussions of agreement, which are less valuable for the more general conversation appearing here. For these reasons, I have elected to exclude extended discussion of them from the main text. For example, in the political realm and regarding methods of coming to agreement see, Schmitt (2019) and Christiano (2013); on things philosophers agree on, see Frances (2017); on degrees of agreement, see Rowbottom (2018).

### 3. Characterizing Agreement

One approach to characterizing agreement may be to think of it as merely the absence of disagreement. Jackson and Jacobs' (1980) presumption of agreement as articulated above may seem to suggest as much and this may also be the pragma-dialectical view.<sup>4</sup> In my view, however, the scale from deep disagreement to full agreement (whatever that may mean, which is discussed below) includes an important middle ground containing complicated notions of ignorance, indifference, ambivalence, and neutrality, which are all important topics for future work. I mention them here to make the point that if a disagreement can end in or agreement can emerge from one of these states, then a preference for agreement may not mean that agreement automatically exists in the absence of disagreement, but that from a position of neutrality, a push is needed to create agreement. If this is correct, then a positive articulation of agreement is still needed. So, how can we do that?

There seem to be two generally utilized methods for philosophically investigating the nature of some thing from the analytic perspective. The first starts from the descriptive, looking at multiple instantiations of the thing in question and articulating the common components—Aristotle might be the most famous proponent of this method. The second is to take a step back, to abstract from any particular instantiation and ask, “what would be required for x at all?” Generally speaking, both methods attempt to do the same thing—to articulate the necessary and sufficient conditions of/for that thing. Personally, I most often oscillate between the two methods. Doing so for this paper has led me to discern five types of agreement, which together cover a very broad selection of agreements we find in the world. In abstraction, the types become

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<sup>4</sup> Despite the importance of and repeated appeals to agreement in the pragma-dialectical theory, I have struggled to find a positive definition of what agreement is for them. The closest I have seen is from the student-focused book entitled, *Argumentation: Analysis, Evaluation, Presentation*, where the authors seem to suggest that the absence of doubt implies agreement. They write, “After all, if there were no doubt, then there would be full agreement with the standpoint, and putting forward the opposite standpoint would then be pointless” (van Eemeren et al., 2002, p. 9).

analytically distinguishable, but viewed in use, they often overlap and connect and thus should not be understood to be mutually exclusive. Once these types are articulated, we can then look back through them as a set.

*Agreeing that/agreeing to (conclusions)*

Perhaps the most foundational types of agreement are agreements ‘that’ or ‘to.’ From the perspective of theoretical reasoning, an agreement ‘that’ focuses on the conclusion that X is the case. For example, if a process of dialogical reasoning or argumentation concludes with the claim *that* “it will rain tomorrow,” and if two or more discussants or interlocutors express attitudes of (equal?<sup>5</sup>) acceptance of the claim, they can be said to agree or to have come to an agreement. That is, they agree *that* it will rain tomorrow. This seems to be the heart of the pragma-dialectical perspective of agreement. Since the pragma-dialectical model of argumentation is a commitment-based model restricted in focus to the externalized utterances of the interlocutors, even reasoning toward an action would conclude in an agreement “*that X and Y should...*”<sup>6</sup> In my view (and that of many others, e.g., Broome 2002; see Streumer 2010), practical reasoning proper (as opposed to the *expression* of practical reasoning) is better understood as ending in an intention to perform an action that will be performed unless it is unexpectedly interrupted.

Thus, from the perspective of practical reasoning and argumentation, one or more interlocutors may agree ‘to’  $\phi$ , that is, to take an action. This seems to be the heart of the view that Black proposes through his offer-acceptance model and his focus on contracts. One simple understanding of a contract is to view it as

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<sup>5</sup> The degree of acceptance may or may not need to be equal. I discuss degrees of agreement below.

<sup>6</sup> Pragma-dialecticians call practical argumentation “pragmatic” argumentation. Illustrating how it works in a policy context, van Eemeren writes, “By means of this subtype of causal argumentation it is then argued *that* the measure proposed in the standpoint *should* be taken because it will lead to an indisputably desirable result” (2018, p. 152. Emphasis added). In this way, in my view, the conclusion is still a belief ‘that’ and is best understood as falling under the umbrella philosophers commonly refer to as theoretical reasoning.

an agreement for one or more people *to* do something. But agreeing *to* can and often is also less formal. For example, after a discussion (deliberative or persuasive in nature), my wife and I may agree *to* visit her parents in Italy during the winter holidays. In this case, rather than agreeing on the acceptance of a claim *that*, we have agreed on an intention *to* act, and unless otherwise indicated, have formed that intention.

Agreeing *that* or *to* can result from argumentation originating from a position of doubt or disagreement, but it can also result from reasoning or discussions where doubt or disagreement may not play a role, as often happens during deliberation or creative thinking (Baumtrog 2017). Applied to the Italy example, I may ask my wife, “What should we do for the winter holidays?” after which she immediately suggests going to Italy. I may then immediately express my agreement. In such a case, disagreement is not required for our agreement. Should I prefer to spend the holiday in Canada, however, the agreement to go to Italy may result from argumentation aimed at persuasion or the resolution of a difference of opinion.

### *Agreeing because (reasons)*

The third type of agreement is an agreement ‘because.’ Like agreeing *that*, this type of agreement focuses on a claim, but in this case, the claim being agreed upon plays the role of a reason or premise rather than a conclusion.

This distinction between agreeing *that/to* and agreeing *because* is important for a few reasons, the most obvious of which is that two people may easily agree on a conclusion while disagreeing on the reasons aimed at supporting that conclusion. Put differently, the same conclusion can often be reached by more than one line of reasoning or argumentative exchange. Again, using the example of going to Italy, my wife may want to travel there for the winter break *because* doing so will enable her to visit with her family, which she would like to do. Whereas I may want to go *because* it will enable me to go to the beach. Thus, we can agree on the conclusion to go to Italy but disagree about the reasons why. Should we both agree *to* travel to Italy *because* it would enable us to visit



her parents, which we both would like to do, we would agree both *to* and *because*.

At this point, it is also important to note that an agreement *because* cannot stand alone—it must always be attached to an agreement *that* or *to*. For example, I cannot agree “because it enables me to go to the beach” without “agree to go to Italy.” It is for this reason that I referred to agreements *that* and *to* as foundational above, and agreements *because* may be thought to occupy a slightly higher level of agreement.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Agreeing so (pragmatic agreement)*

The fourth type of agreement is agreement ‘so,’ which also always seems to be attached to at least one of the other types of agreement and may also be thought of as a level above agreements *that/to*. I am thinking here of examples of hostile negotiations, mediations, or situations where we may want to simply move on. In these cases, we may agree *to* a settlement *so* we can move on. In such a case, no agreement *because* is needed and the agreement *so* operates on a similar level. For example, I recently received an email from a gym that I had not attended in nearly two years asking me pay overdue membership fees. The main reason (aside from the global pandemic) that I had not attended the gym was because I was sure I cancelled my membership shortly before the pandemic lockdowns began in 2020. When I received the email, I responded by expressing my disagreement *that* I owed them money. In the end, I agreed *to* pay them a reduced fee *so* I could put the issue behind me, but we did not agree that I pay *because* I owe the money. As we can see in this example, the analysis of the resolution of the disagreement would be incomplete if we simply ended at the agreement *to* pay; the agreement *so* is separate from but important to the analysis of what happened.

Here, one might argue that the agreement to pay is not agreement *so*, but an agreement *because*, namely, *because* it allows me to move on. But, I think such a view is mistaken. This is because even though my motivation for paying is because it allows me to

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<sup>7</sup> Many thanks to Chris MacDonald and Hasko von Kriegstein for pressing me on this point.

move on, this was not the point of agreement I held with the gym. If it were, it may be a case of extortion. The gym might have reasoned something like the following: ‘we will bother you until you give us money, and paying us would allow us both to move on. Thus, we agree that you will pay because it allows us both to move on.’ Instead, the gym wants me to pay because they think I broke the terms of their contract, and we thus do not agree on the why (the *because*) I should be paying. The agreement *so* here complements the agreement *to* but remains unconnected to an agreement *because*.<sup>8</sup>

Another potential objection is that an agreement *so* in these kinds of cases is not an agreement at all, but rather mere acceptance. The objection holds that in a hostile negotiation, at least one party involved does not actually agree to the terms but merely accepts them. I think, however, that this objection skips a level of analysis. In such a case, the parties are agreeing *to* accept the terms, *so* they can move on. Thus, while I agree that a mere acceptance of the terms plays a central role, recognizing the agreement(s) *to* accept them and understanding that it was *so* the parties could move on, even if unsatisfied, more fully and accurately captures the character of what is happening than denying any role whatsoever to agreement in this case.

#### *Agreeing with (ideologies/policies/persons)*

The fifth type of agreement, agreement ‘with,’ is the most difficult to characterize because it is used to identify both targets and contents of agreement. In the first sense, agreement *with* steps away from claims and instead focuses on their source. The most obvious target of agreeing *with*, is with a person. In this sense, and given the limitation in this paper to the discussion of humans, agreement *with* might be a necessary condition of agreement. I can only agree *that*, *to*, *because*, or *so* if that same content of agreement can be

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<sup>8</sup> There are also cases where agreement *so* and *because* appear together. For example, my niece may agree to feed the cats because they should not be left hungry and so they stop meowing. At a very young age, however, when the ethical considerations regarding hunger may be absent, she may agree only so they stop meowing, without any agreement or disagreement regarding whether they ought to be without food.

found elsewhere. To be sure, without another person I can think *that* or *because*, or intend *to* or *so*, but at least one identifiable ‘other’ is required for agreement to enter the situation. In this way, you can only have the first four types of agreement when they are identified as an agreement *with* another.

I may, however, also sensibly express that I *tend* to agree with my supervisor or the news anchor on television. We may also agree as a matter of policy—*ceteris paribus*, I agree *with* my wife. In this way, agreements can also identify non-propositional content in that they express a general agreement absent any specific propositional claim. This is especially clear when we think of agreeing with a given ideology. Someone who agrees *with* fiscal conservatism or social liberalism, for example, need not agree with every sub *that* claim that falls under the umbrella of fiscally conservative or socially liberal beliefs (if such lists could even be universally formulated, which I find unlikely). Importantly, they may also not agree with every (or any one specific) person who also identifies as agreeing with the framework or ideology. In these cases, the target of agreement, while sometimes represented by a person or group of people, is more akin to a general frame or ideology rather than a specific individual or claim. Those general ideologies are both identifiable as targets and as content with which the person may agree or disagree. Insofar as these ideologies are the products of human intellect and imagination, however, I still consider them human agreements as opposed to the a- or extra-human agreements I aimed to exclude above. If we think of ideologies and humans as both as being comprised (at least in part) of a web of beliefs, we can start to see how they are both targets and representative of (dis)agreeable content simultaneously.

Finally, we may think of the content of a broad or vague agreement *with* as the background agreement often left implicit between interlocutors. For example, if there is indeed a general preference for agreement, the idea seems to be that the preference is to agree *with* each other (*ceteris paribus*) generally, rather than a preference to agree on all *that* or *because* claims in each possible case. This possibility raises important questions about the character, role, and importance of background agreement, or what pragma-dialecticians refer to as the ‘zone of agreement’ required to

conduct a fruitful discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 60; van Eemeren 2018, p. 117). On the rhetorical model of argumentation, this characterization of agreement *with* may be likened to what Tindale refers to as the “shared cognitive environment.” As Tindale explains:

A cognitive environment is a set of facts manifest to us. This idea involves an analogy with our visual environment. That environment comprises all the phenomena in our visual field at a particular time, even though we may not notice them (2004, p. 22).

Thus, “[w]here our cognitive environments overlap, they will give rise to a shared cognitive environment. This idea replaces that of ‘mutual knowledge’ or ‘shared information’” (ibid). While I do not think that agreements *with* necessitate anything as stringent as a set of (shared) facts (or direct matches in propositional attitudes and degrees), I acknowledge that more research on what it means to agree *with* would help clarify the notion of background agreement present in nearly every argumentation theory and in the way we argue in the real world.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, while the waters here are murkier than in the characterization of the previous types of agreement, what I want to suggest is that vague agreeing *with* can be importantly different than simply summing up agreements *that* or *because* and attaching them to a source. One reason is that practically speaking, agreements *with* allow us to better plan and extend our reasoning than we may be able to do otherwise. For example, if as an extension of my general agreement with my wife I donate some money from our joint account to charity, even though we have not explicitly discussed charitable donations generally or this charity specifically, I can do so with more confidence that she will indeed agree with me on this specific decision than I could if I did not maintain a general agreement with her. Similarly, if I know a certain politician generally agrees with *laissez-faire* economics, I can make decisions knowing that given the opportunity, they will likely opt to deregulate industries, without having to wait to assess each decision individually.

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<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for emphasising this point.

#### 4. Toward an articulation of the nature of agreement

We are now able to ask again—what is an agreement? Searching for a common thread among the five types of agreement outlined above suggests a working definition: *an agreement is the recognition of an implicit or explicit, mono, bi-, or multi-directional congruency of an attitude or attitudes held by interlocutors or within ideological positions.*<sup>10</sup>

The recognition of the congruency can be implicit or explicit because an interlocutor maintains and is impacted by agreement regardless of whether the agreement/agreeing is explicit to the agreeer themselves or to any of their interlocutors. For example, if you agree with any of what I have written thus far, I do not need to know it, and it need not even be completely explicit to you for that agreement to contribute to your future actions—whether you choose to e-mail me about this topic, which questions or comments you might make, whether you would attend a future presentation of mine, etc. We also often have an implicit agreement about foundational matters, such as the basic definitions of the words that we are both using, here in the English language.

That agreements can be mono-directional is clearest in cases where the agreement may only be recognized on one side, such as when listening to an argument in the media when the person presenting the argument could have no idea you agree (or are even listening!) In the case of agreeing with an ideology/position, bi-directional or intersubjective agreement is impossible. Agreement can be multi-directional when it manifests within a group.

The use of “attitudes” in the definition is in recognition that agreement occurs with a congruence in held or expressed beliefs (agreement *that*) and intentions (agreement *to*). I believe it also applies to the attitude of desire associated with just wanting to move on (as attached to agreements *so*). In these cases, “attitudes” refers to propositional attitudes (Nelson 2022). While agreeing

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<sup>10</sup> Understood this way, a paradigm example of an agreement—a contract—may be better characterized as the expression of a series of agreements rather than itself being a single agreement. For example, a landlord and a tenant (agreement *with*) may agree *to* the rental of an apartment and agree *that* the lease is in effect for 1 year.

*with* does not fit as neatly into the realm of propositional attitudes, it may be considered a “practical attitude” (Arruda 2016).

This definition nods toward but is not quite the same as an inversion of Aikin and Casey’s definition of disagreement. For them, “A and B disagree IFF A and B do not have a match in the same propositional attitude (of belief, acceptance, or rejection) or degree of that attitude toward a proposition *p*” (Aikin and Casey 2022a, p. 5). It is similar to an inversion of their definition of disagreement because all three of us recognize the importance of the overlap in the type and degree of the attitude. However, whereas they look for a “match,” I look for a less stringent “congruency.” This is because I do not think you need to have a match in the degree of congruency of overlapping attitudes to sensibly speak of agreement. A strict inversion of Aikin and Casey’s (2022a) definition would hold that only ‘perfect agreement’ (the claim that agreement exists IFF there is a match in both type and degree) counts as agreement. Here I side with Rowbottom, who holds that “This does violence to the folk (or everyday) notion of agreement, however, since we normally ascribe agreement whenever ‘close agreement’ holds. And the folk notion is useful for predictive purposes, at the bare minimum, in everyday contexts” (2018, p 227).

Further, and more importantly, I do not want to restrict agreement to propositional attitudes. In my recognition of agreement *with*, the attitude is practical, and I do not want to limit it to the sum of a list of propositions or propositional attitudes that a person holds or that comprise a position. This is in part for the same reasons I do not hold that agreements need to be perfect agreements—coming close is often good enough. In other words, I believe it is enough to have a substantial, but imperfect overlap with a position to sensibly speak of agreeing *with* it and that in many cases it is not even possible to articulate a definite list of propositions that one could be said to agree with. This allows us to avoid needing strict answers to the questions “which propositions comprise the (e.g., capitalist, #MeToo, laissez-faire, environmentalist) position?” and “how many does one need to agree with in kind and degree?” to determine when agreement holds. Rather, I think one can sensibly agree *with* a position and/or a person who

holds it, while maintaining some disagreement or ignorance regarding specific claims or propositions or degrees of agreement with those claims and propositions, that may be said to compose the position.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, I include the notion of recognizing the agreement because I believe it is a necessary condition for an agreement or disagreement. Without recognition, we do not have agreement or disagreement, but rather traverse “the space between” from which an agreement or disagreement may emerge. I do not think that it is appropriate to ascribe states of agreement or disagreement to everything that could theoretically be brought into awareness but has yet to have been (explicitly or implicitly) brought forward.<sup>12</sup>

### *Mixed agreements and degrees of agreement*

As the examples above have already made clear, the differing types of agreement often and sometimes necessarily combine. When that happens, we might say there is a mixed agreement. But, we have also seen that in addition to mixed agreements, agreement falls on a confidence scale; that is, it manifests in degrees. This is a central component of what Gilbert was illustrating with his scale ranging from consensus to empty agreement and is central to the well-known rhetorical model of argumentation forwarded most prominently by Christopher Tindale (1999, 2004, 2015), which develops ideas from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) and holds that the aim of argumentation is to increase the adherence of an audience to a thesis. Putting these combinations and degrees together quickly illuminates the complexity of analyzing agree-

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<sup>11</sup> I acknowledge that determining the threshold needed for asserting that an agreement *with* holds may be more or less important in differing contexts, such as in the law. Lacking precision in these tough cases does not, however, indicate that clearer cases should be ignored or that articulating their differences lacks value. It does, however, help us understand some of the ways in which judicial duties are difficult and complex.

<sup>12</sup> Recognition is a complicated topic, and I am not prepared here to present a list of necessary or sufficient conditions articulating when something has been recognized. This would require a project on the ontology of agreement and disagreement, which, while valuable, is beyond the scope of the present work. On this preliminary account, I understand recognition as also manifesting in degree and more or less explicit internally or externally.

ments. For example, I may agree *with* the chair of my department generally (in terms of content) and then also agree with them (as a target) *that* I should present my work in person at the next available conference, not *because* it offers me the chance to see a new city, but rather *because* it will allow me to better understand the audience's feedback and thus make better use of it to improve my work (which may also be in agreement with the chair to a differing degree). Recalling the example of what to do for the winter break and now switching to a focus on degrees of agreement, I may agree *with* my wife generally and agree with her idea *to* visit Italy, but whereas 100% of her reason to visit is *because* it allows her to see her parents and she has no interest in visiting the beach, I may be evenly split between the two. Thus, when searching for agreement on the meta level, we can find agreement in both type and degree.

Finally, as the example of my gym membership above illustrates, with this new understanding of agreement, we can see how a difference of opinion can remain even when it seems a difference of opinion has been settled. If I start with the standpoint, "I don't intend to pay the fees the gym is asking for," I can nevertheless end up agreeing to pay while disagreeing about the why (*because*) I am paying. If the analysis were restricted to the removal of my doubt or disagreement *to* pay, it would be importantly impoverished by excluding the remaining disagreement in the articulation of the analysis of the resolution of the difference of opinion to pay.

Thus, pointing to specific types of agreement can enrich an analysis of an argumentative discussion or interaction aimed at resolving disagreement in that it helps those providing the analysis to refine the varying embedded differences of opinion in an argumentative discussion as well as start to take more seriously the notion of neutrality in relation to a claim or standpoint—the topic to which I now turn.

### *The space between*

As mentioned above, not all resolved disagreements end in agreement. The resolution of a disagreement can readily end in one or more of the interlocutors finding themselves indifferent. This has happened to me many times when arguing about where to eat for



dinner: a strong initial opposition to one restaurant can end with me being in a new-found state of indifference that falls short of doubt, disagreement, or agreement. In such cases, the discussion may end in a minimal agreement *to*, qualified with an agreement *so* (e.g., *to* eat at the Thai restaurant *so* we can stop delaying). In other cases, however, I may start with a disagreement *that* it will rain tomorrow, then after hearing arguments in favour of rain, become indifferent to the matter. Presented with reasons for why I should believe it will rain, I end up removing any articulatable doubt that it will rain, but also hold no positive agreement that it will; that is, I cannot recognize any overlap in the belief attitudes that it will or will not rain.<sup>13</sup>

In other cases, it may be that we find ourselves newly unknowingly ignorant and wanting to learn more before declaring our agreement or disagreement. For example, I may realize that I don't know enough about meteorology to assess the arguments put forward in support of the claim that it will rain tomorrow. In that case, I may not have a reason to doubt but still bracket the issue in a neutral space until (if ever) the ignorance issue is resolved. And agreement can also spur from ignorance rather than disagreement. This happens in educational settings all the time when students, hearing a new theory for the first time, agree with the theory and take it on as their own belief.

Similarly, the absence of doubt or disagreement does not necessarily imply that agreement exists. This is important because I am ignorant of everything I haven't yet thought about (which is far more than what I have thought about!) and thus have not come to any judgements about whatever it may be. To say that I either agree or disagree with what I have never thought of would be highly inaccurate; rather, I am simply ignorant. In this way, the space between is much larger than any list of agreements or disagreements.

This is also part of the importance of the inclusion of recognition provided in my definition. If we take up a strictly inverted

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<sup>13</sup> In these cases, determining the weight that a reason ought to carry becomes central: Should the reasons that removed my doubt carry so much weight that they then should also cause me to agree? Unfortunately, however, this topic beyond the scope of the present work.

version of Aikin and Casey's (2022a) notion of disagreement to create a definition of agreement, it will state "A and B agree IFF A and B match in the same propositional attitude (of belief, acceptance, or rejection) or [and] degree of that attitude toward a proposition p." Without including the requirement of recognition, the definition suggests that we are in a position of constant disagreement (or agreement) with nearly everyone because our attitudes on many topics will, even if not known to us, match or mismatch. But I don't think this is how most people experience the world. For an agreement or disagreement to arise, the (mis)match or (in)congruency in attitude or degree needs to be acknowledged by at least one person, even if only internally. Otherwise, while the *potential* for disagreement or agreement always lingers, none can be said to exist. For example, when I sit beside someone on the streetcar I may *potentially* agree or disagree with them about a whole host of things. We *may* have matches and mismatches on all kinds of propositions and not know it. But I do not look at that person as someone with whom I agree or disagree about many specific things<sup>14</sup> and not disagreeing with them does not imply a positive agreement. Thus, we can walk around the world as potential agreeers and disagreeers, but our default position is in the space between—even if, when the opportunity arises, we end up preferring agreement as Jackson and Jacobs (1980) point out.

That these middle grounds exist helps demonstrate another reason why a positive characterization of agreement is worthwhile. Without such a definition, how can we tell if a disagreement has stalled in or is travelling through the neutral space between doubt, disagreement, and agreement or if it has produced agreement? In other words, it allows us to ask what is required in cases of neutrality to create positive agreement.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to offer a starting framework for understanding the nature and basic types of agreement we often encounter and aim to create. I have argued for five basic types of agree-

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<sup>14</sup> Some implicit agreements are clear in a case like this. For example, *that* the streetcar is a sufficient means of transportation.

ment—to, that, because, so, and with. I call these ‘basic’ types of agreement because each is a sufficient condition for agreement, and as argued above, agreement *with* is necessary and may also be sufficient when it identifies content as well as a target. In other words, it seems that agreement *with* and at least one other type of agreement can be found in any instance of agreement we find in the world, and I cannot think of an example of an agreement absent all the types of agreement I have pointed to.<sup>15</sup>

Much more could be said about agreement in general and in argumentation specifically. For example, I think more work addressing agreement and fallacies, or more generally how agreement can go wrong, would be very worthwhile. Work on agreements and fallacies has already been started by Scott Aikin and John Casey (2022b) in their discussion of straw man arguments. In terms of agreements going wrong, van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans point to the possibility of “spurious agreements” (2002, p. 136), and in his commentary on Gilbert’s OSSA paper discussed above, Campolo (2001) has raised situations of “frustrated agreement.” Further research on these areas, along with ‘pseudo-agreements,’ would be very welcome.

Further, if we take seriously the two dimensions of agreement pointed to above—overlap in attitude and degree—in conjunction with our thinking about agreements *with*, we can also start to provide more thorough articulations of a problem only recently pointed to in the literature, namely, the problem of deep agreement. Whereas a deep disagreement signals, roughly, disagreement so foundational that the basic premises needed to get argumentation proceeding constructively cannot be found, a deep agreement may be thought of as an agreement so thorough that disagreement could not enter. However, when I think of examples of people who maintain deep agreement, few if any are positive. Instead, the notion conjures examples of indoctrination and cult-like mentalities, many of which have proved highly detrimental or

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<sup>15</sup> It may seem that “agreement on” is another foundational type of agreement, but I think agreement on can be broken down into agreement *that* or *to*. For example, when we agree “on” a restaurant, we agree *to* eat there, or when we agree on a research methodology, we agree *that* we should use the methodology or *to* use the methodology.

harmful in the end. As Casey argues, “agreement, consensus, and collaboration can function as means of control, manipulation, or domination” (2020, p. 104). If we had full agreement on theses provided by those with access to a universal Truth and/or morality, it may not be a problem. But in our daily lives, where these are absent, full agreement could lead to a lack of questioning where it is desperately needed. This recognition thus opens up an important question for theorists of the rhetorical model of argumentation: what is the ideal level of adherence to a thesis? Put another way, how much adherence to a thesis may be too much? More research is needed for a theory of *ideal* agreement to help us determine the best kinds, quantities, and degrees of agreement in any given domain, and such a theory would need to contain a discussion of the ethics of agreement.

Finally, I think there are important but subtle differences between agreement and related concepts such as consent, consensus, and collective action. Some of these will be more important to argumentation studies than others, but these connections also show how a study of agreement could be of value in other domains like agency, political philosophy, law, and epistemology.

In whatever way the research expands, a positive definition and characterization of agreement will be useful. I have made a first attempt to provide one here, characterizing agreement as, broadly, the recognition of congruency of an attitude or attitudes, which in argumentation appears to come in five varieties—agreement *that/to*, agreement *because*, agreement *so*, and agreement *with*,—all of which fall along a scale of degree. My hope is that these conceptual clarifications and distinctions can function as a useful tool for anyone analysing and discussing agreement within their own domain of interest.

**Acknowledgements:** This paper has benefited from conversations with a plethora of people as well as very valuable written comments by two anonymous reviewers. I am, as always, most grateful to my family and a few of my closest colleagues who help me think about everything and who have helped me think specifically about agreement since 2015. I am also thankful to participants at presentations of this paper at the Centre for Research in Reason-

ing, Argumentation, and Rhetoric at the University of Windsor in 2022 and my department of Law and Business at Toronto Metropolitan University in 2023. In these and other environments, I especially benefited from conversations with Scott Aikin, Daniele Bertolini, John Casey, Chris MacDonald, Daniel Mejía, Sareh Pouryousefi, Fábio Shecaira, and Hasko von Kriegstein.

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