Articles

The Appearance of Faultless Disagreement

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ABSTRACT: A common argument for relativism invokes the appearance of faultless disagreement. I contend that the appearance is possible only under conditions that disqualify it as evidence: gross ignorance or irrationality, or else a prior commitment to an especially crude and implausible form of relativism.

RÉSUMÉ: L'un des arguments communément avancé en faveur du relativisme repose sur l'apparente possibilité que des jugements non erronés puissent être divergents. Je cherche à montrer qu'une telle observation n'est possible qu'à des conditions qui la rendent inadmissible à titre de preuve: l'acceptation d'une grossière ignorance, de l'irrationalité, ou encore un attachement préalable à une forme peu plausible de relativisme particulièrement extrême.

A common argument for alethic relativism invokes the appearance of faultless disagreement.[1] In what follows, I argue that this appearance is possible only under conditions that disqualify it as evidence: radical ignorance or irrationality, or else a prior acceptance of an especially crude and implausible form of relativism.

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The relativist argument has the following form:

(1) Disagreements sometimes seem faultless.

Therefore,

(2) Disagreements sometimes are faultless.
(3) Relativism is the best explanation of faultless disagreement.

Therefore,

(4) Relativism is true.

An argument of this kind is open to various objections. How disagreements intuitively seem to us may not be a reliable kind of evidence. Even if it is, we may also have stronger intuitions or impressions to the effect that the situations under discussion are not really disagreements, or that they are not really faultless. Finally, it isn't obvious that relativism, as opposed to nihilism, would be the best explanation of faultless disagreements (if such there be). I think these are all serious worries, but I'll focus simply on the question of whether there really *are* appearances or intuitions or impressions of faultless disagreement, and whether these could be sustained or taken seriously as evidence.

Most of my discussion concerns an argument for moral relativism set forth in Kölbel (2005), Brogaard (2008), and Capps, Lynch and Massey (2009). But I will also have something to say about the application of this form of argument to truth in aesthetics (broadly construed). First, we should note an obvious but important feature of the relativist argument. Relativism promises an explanation of faultless disagreement because, according to relativism, both of two claims can be *true* without being true in some *absolute* sense requiring that all truths form a single set of consistent statements. Thus, if there is such a thing as faultless disagreement, it must involve some other kind of truth — a merely "relative" kind.

The faultlessness of the ways in which both parties arrive at their beliefs seems to require that those conflicting beliefs are *true*. If they were false, their truth values would be "somehow settled not only independently of, but in conflict with, the methods of flawless thinkers": thinkers "competent with the concepts involved in [their] judgment[s], fully informed and performing any processing of information flawlessly" (Kölbel, 2004, 60). And this seems impossible. Yet there is real disagreement in such cases, supposedly: one person believes just what the other person disbelieves. If the (supposed) intuition of faultlessness and the (supposed) intuition of disagreement are both to be trusted, it would seem that there are cases in which truth works just as relativists would have it.

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In the next sections, I'll try to clarify the notions of faultlessness and intuition needed for the relativist argument to succeed. Then I'll consider whether mentally normal adults without a strong prior commitment to a certain kind of relativism would be warranted in accepting the intuitions in question, if they did have them. I'll argue that this attitude would always be irrational and, just as importantly, *counter-intuitive*.

1. Faultlessness

What exactly is epistemic faultlessness? Sometimes it is just blamelessness. Robinson Crusoe can't be blamed for failing to notice trends in the stock market. A child can't be blamed for not understanding Plato's philosophy. In these cases, a person's methods or mechanisms of belief formation are *relatively* faultless: nothing better is possible given limited or defective epistemic capacities. When both parties come to conflicting beliefs in ways that are relatively faultless, their disagreement is relatively faultless. By contrast, a person's belief-forming behaviour is *absolutely* faultless if there is no logically possible thinker who could do a better job in the pursuit of truth. This gives us the notion of an absolutely faultless disagreement.

Many actual disagreements seem at best relatively faultless. Scientists who disagree over cosmology or quantum mechanics may be doing the best they can, given the difficulty of the subject and the limits of human nature. But it seems readily imaginable that thinkers with greatly superior capacities — gods or angels, for example, super-intelligent aliens, human scientists a thousand years from now — would do better. We find it easy to imagine that those beings would form beliefs about these subjects in ways that, compared to human ways, are epistemically superior. Compared with those other (possible) ways of arriving at beliefs, human ways would not be faultless.

An absolutely faultless method or mechanism of belief formation, then, is one that could not be improved on even by such thinkers as these, or any at all. It is not merely a belief-forming process that is impeccable by human standards, but one that involves no faults of any kind. No false beliefs or inaccurate perceptions or faulty inferences enter into the process. If there are other ways in which a belief-forming process can go wrong, we can stipulate that none of those other faults are present either. Perhaps I should also point out that a given process may be absolutely faultless even if that *kind* of process is fallible. If someone's mental calculations on a given occasion are mathematically faultless, that belief-forming process is absolutely faultless even though human calculation is not in general an absolutely faultless way of arriving at beliefs.

Notice that the present account of absolute faultlessness does not depend on any controversial view about the relation of truth and evidence — evidence available to human beings, say, or some broader category of evidence. Suppose that, for some reason, it is not logically or metaphysically possible for *any* thinker, however cognitively superior to us, to realize that a certain belief is false. I find it hard to imagine how this scenario could arise, but my argument will

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depend only on the assumption that if any belief- forming process *is* absolutely faultless, it will not produce a false belief of that kind (or any other kind).

When someone arrives at a false belief, presumably *something* has gone wrong. If some truth is beyond the grasp of any thinker, no one is at fault for failing to know or believe that truth. An ideal thinker whose ways of forming beliefs are always absolutely faultless will be agnostic with regard to that truth. But there must be some fault in a process of belief formation that leads a thinker to believe the *negation* of that truth. (Maybe the fault is simply the belief that that truth is a possible object of knowledge.) Otherwise, the fact that someone holds that false belief is inexplicable.

The distinction between relative and absolute faultlessness is important because only the latter notion is conceptually tied to truth, as the argument for relativism requires. For the argument begins from the claim that sometimes both parties to a disagreement appear to be "free of *any fault whatsoever* (whether or not they can blamed for it)" (Kölbel, 2009, 389, italics mine). I assume that Kölbel means just what he says here: that their ways of coming to their respective beliefs could not be improved upon by any thinker, however superior to actual human beings. This is what my notion of absolute faultlessness is meant to capture.

By contrast, if human disagreements seem to be only relatively faultless, that appearance is no reason to suppose that they (sometimes) involve conflicting *true* beliefs. If every human belief results from a process that, for all we know, involves a false assumption or an illusion, a little self-interested thinking or bias or bigotry, or a single bad inference, there will be nothing incoherent in supposing that one of the conflicting beliefs in any human disagreement is false. The truth-values of the beliefs in question might well be "settled" in a way that conflicts with "the methods of flawless thinkers" (Kölbel, 2004, 60) if those are only relatively flawless — the best that can be expected of human beings in 2010, say, or the best that can be expected of any fallible inquirer.

Nor will it even be more likely than not that all or most of those beliefs are true, on the hypothesis that they were generated by a process that is only *relatively* faultless. A single error may have catastrophic effects. (Or not, as the case may be. But if all we know is that there were a few errors somewhere in the process, or might have been, we have no basis for saying that the resulting belief is *likely* to be true.) So the argument for relativism requires the premise that some disagreements seem intuitively to be absolutely faultless, not just relatively so. Do disagreements ever really seem that way?

2. Relativist Intuitions

People do not normally have the impression of absolutely faultless disagreement in certain areas: cosmology, climatology, theology, or the history of the Ottoman Empire. We find it entirely natural to think that there are objective truths in these areas, in at least the modest sense that all such truths form a set of consistent statements. And most of us think we are not particularly well

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equipped to learn about those truths. We can't directly observe the evolution of the cosmos, or the political effects of Ottoman tax policies. What we can know here (if anything) is mediated by theoretical assumptions and based on evidence that is often fairly meagre and open to various interpretations.

It seems pretty improbable, then, that any one person has arrived at beliefs in these areas on the basis of an *absolutely faultless* process. There's just too much that can go wrong. It's even more improbable that two people arrived at their beliefs in this way, and more improbable still that in doing so they arrived at logically incompatible beliefs. The last claim is acceptable only on the assumption that, in these areas, a certain kind of realism is intuitively plausible, but that assumption seems true.[2] Since we know all this, disagreements in these areas don't *intuitively* seem to us to be absolutely faultless. And if they did ever seem that way, a moment's reflection would surely be enough to make us distrust that intuition or impression.

So when relativists point to the sheer absurdity or implausibility, as they see it, of the view that intractable moral disagreements persist because "some moral facts . . . are simply inaccessible to some unfortunate souls" (Capps, Lynch, and Massey, 2009, 414), they presumably don't mean to suggest that there is something counter-intuitive in the *very idea* of facts being inaccessible to some people. It is common sense that we are all "unfortunate souls" with respect to some subject matters, and that some are even less fortunate than others. (People of merely average human intelligence are even worse off than Newton or Spinoza as concerns cosmology.) What is thought to be absurd must be the idea that *certain* kinds of facts could be accessible to some people but not to others. And what is supposed to be intuitively obvious is the corollary that everyone has all the knowledge and reasoning capacity needed to discover the truth in those areas.

Morality is sometimes said to be a topic of this kind. Arguments for moral relativism from the supposed intuition of faultless disagreement appear in Capps, Lynch, and Massey (2009), Kölbel (2005), and Brogaard (2008). Again, the argument is that some moral disagreements seem (absolutely) faultless, and so really are that way; that relativism best explains how they can be that way, and so relativism is true.

According to Brogaard, for example, disagreements over the moral status of female infibulation appear to be "faultless both linguistically and factually" (Brogaard, 2008, 387). Brogaard explicitly bases her notion of faultless disagreement on Kölbel's work: the disagreement strikes her as *absolutely* free of fault. Since she says nothing more about this example, it seems fair to assume that she takes it to be faultless just in virtue of being the kind of disagreement it is: a moral disagreement across what seem to be divergent moral codes or cultures. If a Somali chieftain and a feminist law professor from New Jersey disagree over the truth of the sentence "Female infibulation is wrong," Brogaard thinks it just *seems* that both of them are aware of *all* the relevant facts and considerations and that both reason *flawlessly* on that basis

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to their conflicting beliefs. (Or, perhaps, it just seems that both of them arrive at their conflicting beliefs on the basis of some flawless kind of moral intuition or feeling.)

No doubt this might be the impression of someone who is already strongly inclined to accept a certain kind of moral relativism, comprising not only the claim that moral truth is relative to a moral code (or something of that nature) but also a number of other highly controversial claims: (i) there is no basic moral code shared by all actual human societies; (ii) people tend to apply their own moral codes with perfect consistency and rationality; and (iii) people tend to know all the relevant non-moral facts in light of which their moral codes (perfectly applied) would deliver some verdict as to the moral status of any human behaviour or practice.

The intuition of absolutely faultless disagreement might also arise for someone who was *very* naïve or *very* irrational — someone who doesn't know that many moral issues are deep and complex, perhaps, or that human beings are not ideally rational or omniscient, or someone who does know those things but fails to see that they warrant some skepticism about the reliability of the processes by which human beliefs are produced. My question is whether someone whose intuitions are not disqualified as evidence in any of these ways could have the intuition Brogaard describes.

It is worth emphasizing that even a relativist might reasonably wonder whether the disagreement Brogaard describes is *absolutely faultless*. One might believe that moral truth is relative in some interesting sense without accepting any of claims (i)–(iii). These are all dubious empirical claims having nothing to do with the nature of truth. It is a difficult empirical question whether any human societies have ever had truly divergent moral codes, for example, so that the differences are not intelligible as differences of non-moral opinion or as different applications of a shared set of basic moral principles or values. When the question is properly understood, many of us will find we are left with too few intuitions for a confident answer (or too many).

Claims (ii) and (iii) are not even controversial: it is patently false that people usually apply their moral principles with perfect rationality, or that they tend to have a perfect knowledge of all the relevant facts. To suppose that they do would require a very high opinion of the average person's epistemic powers or else a very simplistic view of the actual moral codes of most societies and the many different kinds of non-moral considerations that can be important in moral reflection.

Kölbel seems to hold a view along these lines. If an Indian and a Greek disagree over the moral status of the practice of burying the dead, he thinks we can safely assume that "nothing in the cognitive or linguistic practices" of either community that would "permit the conclusion" that either the Indian or the Greek is at fault. It would be "absurd," he says, to suppose that either person believes something that is "not true on her own perspective" (Kölbel, 2005, 69). But Indian culture, say, seems to be a pretty complex phenomenon.

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Is it really out of the question that many Indians at a given time have moral beliefs inconsistent, in ways that they fail to recognize, with important features of their own moral code? Do we typically know enough about the "cognitive or linguistic practices" of any society, even our own, to warrant such confident assertions of (relative) faultlessness?

We should also note, again, that there is no clear connection between moral relativism and the quasi-empirical assumption that anthropological differences of this kind are also differences in a parameter to which moral truth is relative. Kölbel is very quick to assume that, despite sharing a concept of moral wrongness, the Indian and the Greek would not be capable of resolving their disagreement in certain familiar ways—by testing each other's non-moral beliefs about the nature and point of burials, by considering more closely whether any serious harm is done to anyone in burials, or by examining the attitudes toward people as expressed or embodied in the practice, etc.

These are only examples of the kinds of considerations that often matter in trying to resolve moral disagreements. There may be many other important considerations. And it may be that in some cases moral disagreements can't be resolved in any of these ways, despite our best efforts over decades or centuries. In that kind of case, we might begin to suspect that no rational resolution by appeal to some more fundamental shared understanding is possible. It's hard to say whether there has ever been a moral disagreement of this latter kind. But even if there were, it would show only that each party believes something "true on her own perspective," as Kölbel says—something that *would* be true *if* certain basic moral principles were correct. There might still be a real question of whether it was absolutely faultless, "free of any fault whatsoever" (Kölbel, 2009, 389).

So what Kölbel takes to be "absurd" is at least not *intuitively* absurd given what we know about all the ways in which moral reasoning and cross-cultural communication can go wrong. On the contrary, if anything seems absurd here, it is the idea that anyone arrives at moral beliefs in a way that is even *relatively* faultless, let alone absolutely so. Of course, if moral relativism is true, this is not quite so absurd given that, according to that kind of view, absolute faultlessness just is a certain kind of relative faultlessness. As we've seen, Kölbel seems to beg the question in this way, assimilating the idea that each party's attitude is "true on her own perspective" to the idea that it is "free of any fault whatsoever." Similarly, Brogaard's intuition seems to be an artifact of a prior inclination not only to relativism but to a crude and extreme version of that view.

If all supposed intuitions of absolutely faultless disagreement are like this, the argument from the appearance of faultless disagreement is laughably bad — like inferring that Catholicism is the one true faith from the premise that it seems that way to some simple-minded but devout Catholics. This is pretty much how I will object to the argument from the appearance of faultless disagreement. I think we have strong *intuitive* reasons to reject any such appearances or intuitions.

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3. Normal Intuitions

In developing my objection I will not demand that any genuine intuition be free of sophisticated conceptual or theoretical influences. To be sure, it might objected that, just as no one can *have the impression* that the special theory of relativity is true, no one can have the impression or intuition that the epistemic performance or capacities of some pair of human beings could not be improved on by any logical possible thinker. This may be an important worry, but it is not part of my argument. I'll assume that people can have intuitions — beliefs they acquire without any conscious effort — whenever they are at home with the relevant concepts, beliefs, or theories. Composers can have intuitions about polyrhythms or overtones, and art historians can intuitions about the provenance of a medieval icon.

Maybe it is also worth saying that my argument does not depend on any potentially question-begging assumptions about our intuitive conception of truth. The intuitive reasons that count against intuitions of absolutely faultless disagreement are simply the commonsensical beliefs we have with regard to human capacities and the daunting complexity and difficulty of some subject matters. I will appeal to certain strong intuitions of that kind with regard to moral truth, but not to any supposed intuitions as to the ultimate nature of moral truth.

The dialectical result of allowing for conceptually or theoretically sophisticated intuitions such as the intuition of absolutely faultless disagreement is important. If abstruse or sophisticated concepts and beliefs can figure in the intuitions we count as evidence, so can the commonsensical knowledge or attitudes of normal and reasonably well-informed adults. An epistemically *normal person* is an adult human being of average intelligence with some basic and general knowledge of the world who is not suffering from any serious mental illness. Obviously, this is just a gesture in the direction of a familiar concept that normal people know how to apply; it should be good enough for our purposes.

The relativist argument needs the premise that normal people who are not already convinced of relativism in some area sometimes have the intuition that disagreements in that area are absolutely faultless. In fact a slightly stronger premise is needed, as people can have intuitions that they rightly dismiss because of other beliefs or perceptions that weigh more heavily with them. A normal person dismisses the fleeting intuition that the sun is the size of a dime. Under the right circumstances, a normal person dismisses the intuition that a friend is angry as a neurotic fantasy or the intuition that a stranger is flirtatious as wishful thinking. So what the relativist claims as evidence is presumably a set of intuitions of absolutely faultless disagreement that a normal person would not rightly dismiss out of hand. Call intuitions meeting that modest constraint "evidential intuitions."

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4. Miracles

In light of these considerations, we can formulate the premise needed for the relativist argument more precisely:

> (FD) Normal people who are not strongly inclined to moral relativism sometimes have an *evidential* intuition that some moral disagreements are *absolutely* faultless.

FD seems plainly false. Consider Brogaard's example again. The two parties to the disagreement over infibulation might be normal people. Do *they* take each other's beliefs to have been formed in that way?

If they did, their disagreement would vanish. Absolute faultlessness is conceptually tied to truth, and the connection is obvious to a normal person. A normal person who ascribes absolute faultlessness to a process of belief formation ascribes truth to the belief it produces. If either the Somali chieftain or the feminist had an evidential intuition to the effect that the other's epistemic history was absolutely faultless with respect to the issue at hand, that would undermine the earlier attitude of either party. And if they *both* had the evidential intuition that *both* logically incompatible beliefs were formed in that way, both would have to wonder how there could be any objective truth in that vicinity. Someone who wonders about this is no longer in a position to rationally disagree over the issue. (And wondering about this would lead one to ascribe fault to both parties after all, for construing as an objective truth something that has turned out not to be.) So the disagreement would vanish either by one party's coming to reject his original position, or by both coming to both.

This line of thought may seem to assume a controversial view of the epistemology of disagreement, the view that "disagreement with peers is informative as it provides evidence that a certain possibility — the possibility of our having made an epistemic error — has been actualized" (Christensen, 2007, 208). Some philosophers argue that peer disagreement is not a good reason to revise our attitudes. But all this has to do with the rationality of retaining a belief in the face of peer disagreement when it is an open question whether one or both of those who disagree have made some kind of error. Here I am concerned with a different question: If we suppose that someone's belief is *not* the result of any error or any kind of fault whatsoever, can we coherently maintain that the content of that belief is nevertheless false? Unlike the first issue, it seems to me that this one does not allow for much real debate.

When we disagree and I allow the possibility that either one of us has made some error, I can coherently retain my original belief despite recognizing that my epistemic peers disagree. Maybe this is even the more rational attitude. But this is coherent only because when I retain my original belief (or my original degree of confidence in that belief) I can infer from that belief that you must have made some error in coming to what you believe. When I am instead supposing that this is *not* the case, that your way of coming to your belief was

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absolutely faultless, retaining my original belief is flatly incoherent. I will be forced to say that you are wrong despite having arrived at your belief on the basis of entirely true premises, entirely accurate perceptions or intuitions, and impeccable reasoning.

If I have the evidential intuition that *both* of us came to our beliefs in that way, the situation is even worse. How can neither of us be at fault when, just in believing what we do, we each take the other's belief to be wrong? Doesn't that mean that each of us believes the negation of something that is conceptually guaranteed to be true? Or consider what it means for each of us to view the other's belief as false. Surely that forces the conclusion that the other's belief-forming process was somehow faulty. But then that belief about the other's process, being false, must *itself* be the result of a faulty process. And yet the process that leads each of us to hold that false belief is the very process that leads each of us to believe what we do. So my intuition of absolutely faultless disagreement defeats itself.

For these kinds of reasons, it seems impossible to view a disagreement as absolutely faultless while engaged in it. And all of us are in the same position as the people in Brogaard's example fairly regularly: we take ourselves to believe a moral truth that others *wrongly* deny, which naturally leads us to the thought that there is something wrong in the way they came to their mistaken attitude. Since normal people have this experience regularly, it seems likely that, when observing the disagreements of others, they are intuitively inclined to suspect some fault, somewhere. Moreover, the disagreements of others often involve beliefs and reasons that we are intuitively predisposed to accept or reject. Not only are we primed to ascribe fault by the familiar experience of moral disagreement. We are also primed for that, often enough, by our agreement with one party or the other.

FD is thus very implausible if it is meant to hold of the normal people who are *engaged* in the disagreements that, according to FD, seem to be absolutely faultless. They certainly don't seem that way to those who disagree, and couldn't. Nor do they usually seem that way to observers who are more inclined to agree with one party than with the other. So FD doesn't seem true where there is engagement of either kind. But consider an amended version:

> (FD1) Normal people who are not strongly inclined to moral relativism sometimes have an *evidential* intuition that moral disagreements in which they are *not engaged* are *absolutely* faultless.

Suppose a normal person is not engaged in the disagreement Brogaard describes. Would she be likely to have the impression that it is absolutely faultless?

Again, the answer seems plain. There are countless ways in which a normal person might reasonably suspect fault, even if she were totally agnostic with regard to the moral status of infibulation. Either party might fail to fully appreciate

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some important facts: facts about the pain or about the physical, psychological, or cultural damage caused by the practice or, for that matter, about its cultural role and value. Either might have applied her moral code with less than perfect rationality. And surely the commonsensical beliefs or knowledge of a normal person might also suggest the *possibility* that one of the moral codes in conflict here is defective in some way. Moreover, a normal person knows that moral attitudes can be distorted by self-interest or narcissism, cultural or ethnic chauvinism or provincialism, and so on.

So a normal person has excellent intuitive reasons to hold that people's moral capacities and beliefs are subject to all kinds of error. And this moderately skeptical attitude should count as an *intuition* if we are allowing (for the sake of argument) that people can have *intuitions* of absolutely faultless disagreement. Only someone who has a fairly sophisticated understanding of evidence, reasoning, belief, and truth can be sufficiently comfortable with the concept of absolutely faultless disagreement for that concept to figure in her intuitions. But anyone who has that understanding and is not grossly ignorant of the world will also realize that human ways of forming beliefs are subject to the various kinds of error listed above.

It's hard to imagine that a normal person would have an intuition of absolutely faultless disagreement in the first place. Such an intuition would be deeply at odds with common sense, as it would represent two people as having simultaneously achieved something rarely — arguably, *never* — achieved by anyone. So it seems that a normal person would at least have intuitions of faultiness as concerns any genuine moral disagreement. But suppose she would have that intuition *and* the conflicting intuition of absolute faultlessness, in some cases. What would her reaction be?

The case against accepting the intuition of faultless disagreement is like Hume's argument against miracles. The hypothesis that one of the parties to the disagreement has made some kind of mistake will always be vastly more probable than the hypothesis that *both* parties arrived at their beliefs in absolutely faultless ways. I am not appealing here to the additional improbability that attaches to the latter hypothesis given an antecedent assumption that in any genuine disagreement at least one person believes something false. I think that we do tend to make that assumption, and that doing so is reasonable given what we know about moral reasoning. Even without that assumption, however, any intuition or impression of absolute faultlessness would be defeated by the contrary intuition that someone is at fault.

A normal person who had the former intuition would dismiss it just as we dismiss obvious perceptual illusions, neurotic fantasies, or wishful thinking. Of course, there could be abnormal persons — raised by wolves, say, or suffering from paranoid schizophrenia — for whom the former intuition would be the dominant one. But intuitions caused by gross ignorance or derangement are not evidence that the world is the way those intuitions represent it. Nor, in this context, can we count as evidence intuitions caused by a strong tendency to

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construe moral truths as relative to the speaker's moral code. Since there seems to be no other way that an intuition of absolutely faultless disagreement could survive the conflict with our normal intuitions, the relativist argument fails.

5. Aesthetic Disagreement

Aesthetic disagreement is often thought to be a more natural setting for relativism. Kölbel writes that "most people have a healthy pre-theoretical intuition" that, in some aesthetic disagreements, at least, both parties "have exactly the view they ought to have," so that "for both of them changing their view would constitute a mistake" (Kölbel, 2004, 54). What is envisioned here seems to be a kind of relative faultlessness. Each person has had "sufficient opportunity to sample the works of both artists" and has "given the matter enough consideration" (Kölbel, 2004, 54) — enough experience and consideration to apply a given set of standards without making any kind of mistake. The possibility of a mistake seems to require standards, and this distinguishes the kind of difference under discussion from cases in which people use aesthetic predicates merely to report or express a subjective response.

Now, if we know that a person is making use of standards that are very easy to understand and apply, we can have the (correct) impression that she has applied them perfectly to some work of art. Suppose I judge a painting to be good if and only if it has lots of bright colours. It will be easy to tell whether a given painting is good on that criterion. And if you judge a painting to be good if and only if it depicts flowers, it will be just as easy to tell whether a given painting is good on that other criterion. If we disagree about a colourful painting of a house, our disagreement is relatively faultless, and that fact can be obvious to a normal observer.

Of course, this kind of relative faultlessness is not enough. As with the case of moral disagreement, the standards that figure in aesthetic disagreement may themselves open to rational criticism. Here neither party's standards are at all credible, given what a normal person knows about art and art appreciation. On the basis of your knowledge of art history, you might appreciate a painting for some element of subtle parody. A jazz aficionado might appreciate a passing allusion to the melody of a standard tune amidst what sounds like chaos to a less sophisticated listener. A deep appreciation of any form of art will draw on all kinds of complex responses, attitudes, and knowledge. But relative to a more credible set of standards, it doesn't seem especially likely that anyone's application of those standards is faultless. Maybe the person who prefers Matisse failed to attend with sufficient care to Picasso's use of colour, or lacks some bit of cultural or historical knowledge needed for a full appreciation of some of his paintings. Maybe one person failed to notice some interesting harmonic inversion or tempo change that, had it been noticed, would have made a difference to his judgment. It is not at all easy to imagine a case in which it would be just *obvious* to a normal person that nothing of this kind has gone wrong.

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So as with the case of moral disagreement, a normal person is not especially likely to have the intuition that a real aesthetic disagreement involving credible standards is relatively faultless. For the kinds of reasons suggested above, it will not be obvious to a normal person that real disagreements involve conflicting standards rather than different but faulty applications of shared standards. Even if credible standards do seem to conflict, though, there are two further alternatives to the hypothesis of absolutely faultless disagreement that a normal person would have to take seriously.

The first is that the difference in standards is rooted in some brute difference in aesthetic sensibilities or preferences. One person may respond intensely just to formal properties of paintings, for example, while having only a slight capacity for engagement with conceptual content—historical or religious or political meaning, say. And the other may be more interested just in the latter features. Each may be a sophisticated appreciator of paintings, with correspondingly complex and credible standards based in these different sensibilities. Still, if the difference is ultimately to be explained in this way, the impression of real *disagreement* will be undermined by recognition of that fact.

On this view, each person's aesthetic judgment is a sophisticated articulation of a subjective response. Each can convincingly argue that *if* we like a certain range of features, we have good reason to judge that one painting is better than another. But it's doubtful that either really means to argue that people should like one range of features rather than another. The seeming disagreement is likely to reduce, in the end, to something other than disagreement. By debating the aesthetic merits of this or that, each party will come to see that the other has good reasons given her basic outlook, and that the other's basic outlook is not her own.

A second possibility is that the two people disagree about even these seemingly basic sensibilities. Psychoanalytic literary theorists disagree with postmodernists, say, as to which aesthetic standards are appropriate. Arguably, these are real disagreements (however faulty) and not just articulations of divergent responses. Thus, in order to have the impression or intuition of an *absolutely* faultless aesthetic disagreement, one would have to construe it as a situation in which none of these possibilities are realized: (i) no disagreement but merely a sophisticated (or crude) difference in sensibility; (ii) real disagreement with different but faulty standards that each party applies perfectly; (iii) real disagreement with shared credible standards that one or both parties apply imperfectly; (iv) real disagreement over the status of the different credible standards that each applies either perfectly or imperfectly.

Can we really have the *intuition* that none of these possibilities are realized in a given case of apparent disagreement? The situation seems much the same as in the moral case. If conceptually sophisticated intuitions are to be admitted as evidence, as the relativist argument requires, it seems at least as likely that an intuition of absolutely faultless disagreement would be outweighed by intuitive (or "intuitive") awareness of these alternative possibilities.

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6. Conclusions

The argument from the appearance of faultless disagreement needs to invoke intuitions available to people who are neither strongly inclined to a form of moral relativism nor seriously impaired by irrationality or ignorance. Intuitions of this kind would be possible only for someone with a fairly sophisticated epistemological outlook. Hence other beliefs that would arise without any conscious effort on the part of such a person can also be counted as intuitions, and as evidence. Some of those other beliefs would lead a normal person not already strongly inclined to moral or aesthetic relativism to dismiss intuitions of absolutely faultlessly disagreement. So those intuitions are not evidence of anything.

I have taken no stand on the question of whether moral or aesthetic relativism is true, or of whether any disagreement is or could be absolutely faultless. My argument appeals merely to the conceptual connection between the notions of absolute faultlessness and truth, and to some uncontroversial claims about human powers of moral and aesthetic judgment. Maybe relativism is true. If it is, there may be some absolutely faultless disagreements. Be that as it may, appeals to the *appearance* of faultless disagreement do nothing for the relativist cause.

Notes

1 See, for instance, Kölbel (2004, 2009), Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2007).

2 Enoch (2009, 42) gives a convincing example of how prior realist intuitions make it intuitively plausible to assign fault in the case of disagreements over arithmetic, even when we have no idea which party is wrong or what exactly the fault might be. Surely this is true of many other subjects as well.

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