

The Limits of Faultless Disagreement

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Abstract. Some have argued that the possibility of *faultless disagreement* gives relativist semantic theories an important explanatory advantage over their absolutist and contextualist rivals. Here I combat this argument, focusing on the specific case of aesthetic discourse. My argument has two stages. First, I argue that while relativists may be able to account for the *possibility* of faultless aesthetic disagreement, they nevertheless face difficulty in accounting for the intuitive *limits* of faultless disagreement. Second, I develop a new non-relativist theory which can account for the full range of data regarding faultless disagreement. This view—‘Humean Absolutism’—integrates two of Hume’s central principles from *Of the Standard of Taste* into a truth-conditional framework, resulting in a non-bivalent theory of aesthetic truth. I argue that Humean Absolutism can underwrite the possibility of faultless disagreement whilst retaining reasonable limits around the phenomenon. I close by relating this positive account of faultless disagreement to broader issues concerning the cognitive role of truth-value gaps.

In the debate between semantic relativism and its rivals, the notion of *faultless disagreement* has been highly influential. In particular, some have argued that the possibility of faultless disagreement weighs in favour of relativist semantic theories for certain areas of discourse.² Here I contest this argument as it applies to aesthetic judgments. The central data in the aesthetic domain arises from cases like the following:

(1) Dave: “Mozart is a better composer than Beethoven.”

Eve: “No, Beethoven is a better composer than Mozart.”

Assuming that Dave and Eve are sincere, this case appears to exhibit a state of disagreement.³ But some claim that the case also exhibits a further feature which is

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² Prominent defenders of this view include Kölbel (2004) and Lasersohn (2005).

³ I adopt the distinction between disagreement as a *state* and disagreement as an *activity* from Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, pp.60-61). While the appearance of disagreement here could be undermined by further description of the case, I will assume that (1) is best thought of as a case in which Dave and Eve stand in a state of disagreement.

absent in ‘ordinary’ disagreements: specifically, that the disagreement appears to be *faultless*, in that the two subjects could—in some sense—both be *correct*. In this paper I aim to clarify this claim and to examine its consequences. I argue that even if we admit the possibility of faultless aesthetic disagreement, we need not accept a relativist semantics for aesthetic judgments. I argue that relativists themselves face trouble accounting for the full range of data regarding faultlessness, and that the supposed explanatory deficiency of absolutism with respect to faultless disagreement is illusory.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section one I outline the argument from faultless disagreement to aesthetic relativism and clarify what the idea of a ‘faultless’ disagreement amounts to. In section two I argue that, once we consider further data regarding faultless disagreement, the putative relativist advantage falls away. Specifically, I argue that relativists face trouble accounting for the *limits* of faultless aesthetic disagreement, and that this fact deals a serious blow to the relativist’s ability to explain the phenomenon. In the second half of the paper I move on to consider how *aesthetic absolutists* can account for appearances of faultless disagreement. In section three I explain why absolutist views which appeal to epistemic notions of faultless disagreement should not be considered a viable option in this debate. In section four I begin to develop my positive view—Humean Absolutism—which is based on two of David Hume’s principles from ‘Of the Standard of Taste’. Humean Absolutism makes the verdicts of *ideal critics* central to determining aesthetic value and involves a denial of the principle of bivalence for aesthetic truth. In section five I argue that this account can endorse the possibility of faultless disagreement whilst nevertheless retaining reasonable limits around the phenomenon. Finally, in section six, I comment on some broader issues arising from the Humean Absolutist account of faultlessness, concerning the cognitive role of truth-value gaps.

1 From Faultless Disagreement to Relativism

The argument from faultless disagreement stems from the observation that cases like (1) can simultaneously exhibit both faultlessness *and* disagreement. The argument based on this observation is exclusionary: it aims to show that only relativists are in a position to give a satisfactory explanation of the joint presence of faultlessness and disagreement in such cases.

Here I will briefly outline relativism and its rivals, and in so doing I will explain how the exclusionary argument against relativism's rivals proceeds. In addition to aesthetic relativism, two further positions will be of interest to us here: *contextualism* and *absolutism*. The descriptions I give of the three positions will be simplified, and not entirely uncontroversial, but they will suffice for our present purposes.⁴ We can define the three positions in terms of acceptance and denial of various combinations of the following two assumptions:

CONTENT-VARIANCE.

Aesthetic judgements are *context-sensitive*; that is, an aesthetic judgement may denote different propositions in different contexts of use.

TRUTH-RELATIVITY.

The truth-conditions of aesthetic judgements vary between contexts.⁵

Contextualism endorses both CONTENT-VARIANCE and TRUTH-RELATIVITY.⁶ On one simple form of this view, aesthetic judgements like “Beethoven is a better composer than Mozart” carry a hidden indexical parameter which is supplied by the speaker's *perspective* or *standard of taste*—such that in case (1), Dave expresses the proposition *Beethoven is a better composer than Mozart according to Dave's standard of taste*, and Eve expresses a parallel proposition making reference to *her* standard.⁷ Since content varies between contexts of use, it appears to follow that truth-conditions will vary in tandem—so contextualists also endorse TRUTH-RELATIVITY.

⁴ Note also that these three options together do not exhaust logical space: for instance, one might instead endorse a *non-cognitivist* view such as aesthetic expressivism. Since my focus here is largely on the dialectic between relativism and absolutism, however, I do not entertain non-cognitivist alternatives.

⁵ In both the case of CONTENT-VARIANCE and TRUTH-RELATIVITY, we must restrict our attention to differences resulting from variation of aesthetic factors between contexts. For instance, the fact that aesthetic judgements might vary in truth-value across time does not entail that TRUTH-RELATIVITY is true for aesthetic judgements.

⁶ This definition is in line with one standard use of ‘contextualism’. However, it is at odds with MacFarlane's (2009) use of the term, which is not limited to accounts which postulate variance of *content* between contexts.

⁷ Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) and Schaffer (2011), among others, defend contextualism about taste-predicates. Note that one can be a contextualist without holding that *individual* standards give rise to the context-sensitivity in question; see e.g. Glanzberg (2007).

Contextualists seem to have a swift explanation of why cases like (1) could exhibit faultlessness. Insofar as the propositions expressed by Dave and Eve make reference to their respective standards of taste, it might be the case that both have spoken truly—that is, it might be the case that Beethoven is better than Mozart according to Dave’s standard whilst the converse is true according to Eve’s standard. The fact that both subjects express true propositions, then, is taken to explain the sense in which neither subject is at fault. However, contextualism is often thought to preclude the possibility of *disagreement* in cases like (1). If Dave’s judgment refers only to his standard and Eve’s judgment refers only to her standard, then the judgments do not appear to be in any kind of conflict—indeed, they appear to be entirely consistent. In the absence of apparent conflict, it is difficult to see why, by the contextualist’s lights, we should think that Dave and Eve disagree in (1).⁸

Absolutism, on the other hand, *denies* both CONTENT-VARIANCE and TRUTH-RELATIVITY. Absolutists hold that aesthetic judgements do not vary in either content or truth-conditions between contexts—if a judgement is true in the mouth of one subject, it must also be true in the mouth of any other arbitrary subject.^{9,10} Unsurprisingly, absolutists seem well-placed to make sense of the presence of disagreement in cases like (1). For the absolutist, Eve has expressed the negation of the content of Dave’s utterance—so, given the absoluteness of aesthetic truth, the two judgments are inconsistent, and this inconsistency is taken to be sufficient to explain the presence of disagreement. However, this explanation appears to undermine the notion that (1) could be a *faultless* disagreement. If Dave and Eve’s judgments are inconsistent, then surely at least one subject must fail to speak truly. As such, it appears to follow that at least one subject must be at fault—even if that fault is very difficult to detect. Absolutists can endorse the presence of disagreement in cases like (1) but not, it seems, the presence of faultlessness.

⁸ For recent discussion of the disagreement objection to contextualism, and responses to it, see López de Sa (2008), Sundell (2011), Baker (2012; 2014) and Huvenes (2012).

⁹ Note that being an absolutist with respect to some aspects of context does not preclude endorsing other kinds of context-sensitivity in aesthetic expressions. For instance, holding that aesthetic judgements are not sensitive to *standards of taste* at either the level of content or the level of truth-conditions is consistent with holding that such judgments exhibit the kind of context-sensitivity associated with gradable adjectives like ‘tall’.

¹⁰ In the literature this position is sometimes labelled ‘realism’. However, the metaphysical connotations of this term make it unsuitable for use in this particular debate. Absolutists merely hold that aesthetic contents have absolute truth-values, and need not be committed to any particular metaphysical story about how absolute aesthetic truth is grounded. I hereby drop the term ‘realism’ and instead adopt ‘absolutism’ to describe any position which denies both the content-variance and the truth-relativity of aesthetic truth.

Relativism aims to combine the limited successes of contextualism and absolutism whilst avoiding the respective pitfalls of those two views. In simplified terms, relativism involves denying CONTENT-VARIANCE whilst nevertheless endorsing TRUTH-RELATIVITY. Relativists hold that aesthetic judgements are *invariant*—unlike contextualists, they do not hold that judgments like “Beethoven is a better composer than Mozart” express different propositions in the mouths of different speakers—but they also hold that aesthetic propositions themselves vary in truth-value between points of evaluation. The proposition denoted by an aesthetic judgement might be true as evaluated from one perspective (corresponding to a standard of taste, for example) and yet false as evaluated from another. The upshot is that in case (1), the proposition expressed by Dave could be true as evaluated at his standard of taste but false as evaluated from Eve’s standard—and vice versa for the proposition expressed by Eve.¹¹

Relativists take the denial of CONTENT-VARIANCE to entitle them to endorse the presence of disagreement in (1). Since the proposition expressed by Eve is the negation of that expressed by Dave, they claim, the two subjects disagree.¹² Additionally, relativists take their acceptance of TRUTH-RELATIVITY to allow them to endorse the appearance of faultlessness. If both Dave and Eve speak truly as evaluated from their own contexts—that is, truly according to their own standards of taste—then we can endorse the appearance that neither subject is at fault. Relativists thus hold that a faultless aesthetic disagreement is one which meets the following characteristics: first, the subjects involved endorse contrary (or otherwise incompatible) judgments and thus express inconsistent contents; and second, each subject speaks truly as evaluated from his or her own context. Given the failures of contextualism and absolutism, the availability of this positive account of faultless disagreement is taken to weigh in favour of aesthetic relativism.

¹¹ At this level of detail, the view I label ‘relativism’ is neutral with respect to the distinction between *moderate* relativism (or ‘non-indexical contextualism’) and *radical* or *genuine* relativism. See MacFarlane (2009) and López de Sa (2011) for discussions of these matters. Since nothing in my arguments turns on these distinctions, however, I will put them to one side.

¹² In practice matters are not so simple, and there is a serious question-mark over whether relativists are in a better position to account for disagreement than contextualists. For discussion, see MacFarlane (2007), Stojanovic (2007), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009), and Francén (2010). My focus here, however, is on the *faultlessness* component of the argument. As such I will not further explore the prospects for contextualist and/or relativist explanations of disagreement.

There are at least three strategies for responding to this exclusionary inference from faultless disagreement to relativism. The first strategy is to deny that faultless disagreement is possible.¹³ If the phenomenon turns out to be illusory, it will be no cost for contextualists and absolutists that they cannot account for it. I do not pursue this strategy here, since my aim is to uncover what, if anything, follows from the assumption that faultless disagreement is possible. As such, I grant the *possibility* of faultless disagreement in cases like (1) for the sake of argument. The second strategy is to cast doubt on the relativist's ability to account for faultlessness and/or disagreement in cases like (1). The thought is that if relativists themselves are unable to endorse appearances of faultless disagreement, then all theories face a challenge with respect to the phenomenon. I pursue a version of this strategy in section two by arguing that relativism faces serious difficulties once we consider a fuller set of data regarding faultless disagreement. The third strategy is to argue that a *non*-relativist theory can, after all, endorse appearances of faultless disagreement.¹⁴ If absolutists, for example, can endorse appearances of faultless disagreement, it will be no distinction of relativism that it is able to do so—and thus the exclusionary inference from faultless disagreement to relativism will be unavailable. My focus in the second half of this paper is on this strategy, as I develop a new absolutist account of the aesthetic which can endorse appearances of faultless disagreement.

As noted above, I assume the possibility of faultless disagreement for the sake of argument. But before moving on, we must consider what this assumption amounts to: what does it take for a disagreement to be faultless? The presentation of this data in the literature is sometimes ambiguous. The argument against absolutism described above assumes that a faultless disagreement is one in which both subjects *speak truly*, at least with respect to their own contexts. But it is not at all clear that this is *necessary* for a disagreement to satisfy the appearance of faultlessness. Max Kölbel, a pioneer of the inference from faultless disagreement to relativism, describes a faultless disagreement as one in which both subjects have “exactly the view they ought to have on the question”, and “for both of them changing their view would constitute a mistake.” It is at best unclear that meeting Kölbel's criteria requires that one's belief must be *true*, even with respect to one's own context.¹⁵ In what follows,

¹³ Stojanovic (2007) and Schaffer (2011) pursue versions of this strategy.

¹⁴ See Moltmann (2010), Barker (2010) and Schafer (2011) for instances of this strategy.

¹⁵ Kölbel (2004), pp.53-54. In more recent work, however, Kölbel claims the relevant intuition to be that cases like (1) are free of fault in *all* senses (Kölbel, 2009, p.389 fn.19). I take this to be a far more controversial claim than the mere existence of disagreements which are faultless *in some key sense*—and I am only willing to grant the latter for the sake of argument.

my minimal assumption about the nature of faultlessness is as follows: a faultless disagreement is one in which the beliefs of both subjects are beyond a certain key kind of criticism. Truth at one's own context may be one way to fulfil this criterion, but we should be open to the possibility that some other feature than a belief's truth could satisfy the appearances we find in cases like (1). The point is that merely endorsing the initial data regarding faultless disagreement does not seem, on the face of it, to require that we underwrite the *joint truth* of the beliefs in (1). This issue, which I explore further below, will be crucial to the arguments in the second half of this paper.¹⁶

2 Relativism and the Limits of Faultless Disagreement

In granting the possibility of faultless disagreement for the sake of argument, I thereby assume that a successful theory of aesthetic value must *endorse* the intuitions arising from cases like (1) rather than merely explaining them away. However, I contend that a successful theory must also account for a hitherto unrecognized further aspect of faultless aesthetic disagreement—namely, the *limits* of the phenomenon. The guiding thought here is as follows: even if *some* aesthetic disagreements could be faultless, it seems highly implausible that *all* could be. To illustrate, consider another case involving Dave and Eve:

(2) Dave: “Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is better than *Three Blind Mice*.”

Eve: “No, *Three Blind Mice* is better than Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.”

This second case exhibits different intuitive features to (1): whatever the merits of *Three Blind Mice*, it seems obtuse to claim that the nursery rhyme is a better work of music than Beethoven’s Fifth, and as such it is much harder to generate the judgment that Eve is faultless in (2). For my part, I find the appearance of faultlessness entirely absent in (2)—but it would be sufficient for dialectical purposes to say that even if there is faultlessness in (2), it is either not of the same kind or not to the same degree as that found in (1). Crucially, however, it seems perfectly consistent to deny that (2)

¹⁶ There are, of course, further questions about the nature of faultless disagreement: for instance, does the presence of faultlessness require Dave and Eve to be able to *acknowledge* that each other’s beliefs are faultless? We will return to this issue briefly in section five.

could be a faultless disagreement whilst accepting that (1) might be. This point can be made just as easily with Hume's famous example:

Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Tenerife, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. (Hume 1757/1875, sect. 8.)

For our purposes, the key lesson from Hume's example is as follows: even if aesthetic value is *to some extent* a matter of taste, there are limits. Some aesthetic comparisons are beyond the pale—we should not, for instance, think of someone who equates Ogilby with Milton as faultless. In order to respect this datum, an account of faultless disagreement must not only underwrite the possibility of faultlessness in cases like (1) but also show how such cases can be distinguished from Ogilby/Milton-style cases—that is, those which do not appear to be faultless. In other words, such an account must underwrite not only the *possibility* of faultless aesthetic disagreement, but also the *limits* of the phenomenon.

However, the relativist account of faultlessness described in section one appears to be unable to account for the contrast between (1) and (2). Consider (RF), which is at the heart of the relativist view:

(RF) A subject's aesthetic judgment is faultless iff that judgment's content is true according to the subject's standard of taste.

The argument for relativism described above assumes that relativists can account for faultlessness in terms of a principle like (RF). But this principle is not nuanced enough to distinguish between cases (1) and (2)—indeed, it appears to give precisely the same treatment to the two cases. Suppose that Eve's standard of taste ranks *Three Blind Mice* higher than Beethoven's Fifth, and that Dave's standard ranks conversely. If this is so then (RF) entails that both judgments in (2) are faultless, since both are true according to the relevant individual's standard of taste. As such, relativism has it that (2) can be an instance of faultless disagreement; assuming that the beliefs in (2) accord with the subjects' standards of taste, relativists must hold that the case is perfectly analogous to (1). But this runs contrary to the intuitive data, which at very least takes there to be a distinction between the two kinds of cases.¹⁷ The simple

¹⁷ It might be objected that the distinction can be explained in terms of frequency: that since it would be very rare to come across a subject who preferred *Three Blind Mice* to Beethoven's Fifth, our differing judgments about (1) and (2) are accounted for by the feeling that Eve's judgment in (2) is a marginal one. But this does not appear to be a viable explanation of all

relativist account has the illicit result that cases (1) and (2) are alike with respect to the possibility of faultlessness. Endorsing this account, then, comes at the cost of endorsing the *global* possibility of faultless disagreement—the idea that *any* aesthetic disagreement could be faultless if the contents expressed accord with the standards of taste of the relevant speakers.¹⁸ Insofar as the appeal of relativism is supposed to be its ability to *endorse* the intuitive data surrounding faultlessness, the conflict with judgments about cases like (2) represents a serious challenge to the view.

The main goal of this section—to present the objection to relativism based on the apparent limits of faultless disagreement—is fulfilled above. Before moving on, however, I will also explore one natural avenue of response to the above challenge and argue that it faces difficulties. The response in question attempts to add detail to the relativist view, and specifically to further explain the hitherto underdescribed notion of a *standard of taste*—a notion which at any rate requires further explication before we can fully understand the relativist theory.¹⁹ To account for the distinction between (1) and (2), relativists may attempt to develop a notion of standards of taste which diminishes the possibility that “*Three Blind Mice* is better than Beethoven’s *Fifth*” could be true according to Eve’s standard of taste. If successful, this would allow the relativist to sidestep the problem of limits since the view would no longer be committed to Eve’s speaking truly according to her own standard in case (2).

One natural view of a standard of taste links the notion closely to an individual’s preferences and basic aesthetic responses—such that if Eve is disposed to prefer the nursery rhyme to the symphony, then her standard decrees that the nursery rhyme is better.²⁰ However, combining this view of standards with (RF) makes it hard to see how relativists could underwrite the limits of faultless disagreement. It is clearly

similar cases. For instance, the judgment that Justin Bieber’s work is better than Beethoven’s will rarely, if ever, appear to be faultless—but it would not be at all surprising to find that, as a matter of fact, preferences in favour of Bieber are just as prevalent as preferences in favour of Beethoven. Moreover, it does not appear that our judgments about (2) are sensitive to these statistical features of the case.

¹⁸ One might think that this consequence is less objectionable in other domains. The global possibility of faultless disagreement may be plausible for the case of gustatory taste—e.g. for predicates like ‘tasty’—but these intuitions do not transfer cleanly over to the case of aesthetic value. Later, however, I will suggest that my positive account can account for this apparent distinction between aesthetic value and gustatory taste.

¹⁹ An alternative relative response might involve rejecting (RF) and instead providing an alternative relativist account of faultlessness. I will not consider the prospects for such a strategy here.

²⁰ A view like this appears to be endorsed by both Kölbel (2009), p.383 fn.12. and Wright (2008), p.381.

possible for Eve to be disposed to respond in a way which corresponds with her judgment in (2), and so—on this view—the possibility of (2)'s faultlessness looms large.

In the light of this, the relativist may wish to develop an alternative conception of a standard of taste in order to account for the limits of faultless disagreement. In attempting such a task, the relativist may attempt to define standards of taste in terms of something less immediately accessible than our basic aesthetic responses and preferences. For instance, perhaps one's standard of taste describes a more *refined* or *developed* version of one's actual preferences: although our actual responses may reflect immaturity and/or misguidedness, our standards of taste are not subject to such distortions. On such a view, Eve's pattern of positive responses to *Three Blind Mice* and negative responses to Beethoven is consistent with Beethoven's Fifth nevertheless being better than *Three Blind Mice* according to her standard of taste, since her standard of taste encodes a more refined version of her actual preferences. We might, after all, reasonably expect that a refinement of Eve's preferences would lead to her coming to better appreciate the relative merits of the two works.

To see how such a view might account for the limits of faultless disagreement, consider again case (2). Although (ex hypothesi) Eve prefers *Three Blind Mice* to Beethoven's Fifth, we need not think that her standard of taste—which encodes her *refined* preferences—reflects this actual preference. As such, we need not think of her judgment as faultless. After all, it may be that once her tastes were refined, she would come to prefer the symphony to the nursery rhyme—and since her standard of taste is conceived in terms of the latter refined preferences, the relativist's principle (RF) can explain why (2) is not a faultless disagreement.

But we must consider the contrary assumption here, too: might it not instead be the case that Eve's preferences, even when refined, would persist in ranking *Three Blind Mice* above Beethoven's Fifth? In such a case, the above explanation will be unavailable: if Eve's standard of taste tracks her refined preferences, then (under the latter assumption) (2) is a faultless disagreement. As such, the relativist needs some way to undermine such apparent possibilities. Presumably, a gloss on the notion of 'refinement' is required: some explanation of what it is for a set of preferences to be 'refined' which diminishes the possibility that Eve's preferences could fall under the concept and, more generally, has the consequence that nobody with refined preferences endorses such a judgment.

However, the relativist must be very cautious when proposing strong notions of refinement like this, since some such views would push one towards a significant

degree of *objectivity* about aesthetic matters. If refinement can be explained as a process which makes one's preferences *better*—in an unrelativised sense—then it seems that the relativist will be committed to the existence of some kind of aesthetic objectivity. That is: admitting external criteria by which we can rank sets of aesthetic preferences as 'refined' or 'unrefined' is a clear concession to objectivist theories of aesthetic value. For instance—to take an extreme example—the relativist cannot claim the process of refinement involves moving closer to the (unrelativised) aesthetic truth, since the relativist cannot abide a notion of absolute aesthetic truth. A strong notion of refinement would, at least, be in tension with the kinds of anti-realist and anti-objectivist tendencies which lead one to relativism in the first place. As such, endorsing a strong notion of refinement in order to account for the limits of faultless disagreement would represent a significant climbdown on behalf of relativists and should be avoided.²¹

On the other hand, many weaker accounts of refinement seem insufficient to bridge the gap between (1) and (2). Here is a simple example: perhaps a refined preference merely reflects a preference formed through a sufficient amount of consideration of the aesthetic objects in question. This reflects a natural interpretation of (2), namely that Eve has simply not yet spent enough time appreciating Beethoven's Fifth. But unless the notion of 'significant consideration' is construed strongly enough to verge on question-begging, it will be insufficient. For it is unclear why we should think that repeated engagement with *Three Blind Mice* and Beethoven's Fifth *must* eventually yield a preference in favour of the latter.²²

The 'refined standards' response to the limits objection is, then, problematic. Its defender must chart a difficult course between the strong and weak versions of refinement discussed above. I do not take this to show that relativism about aesthetic value is untenable, and I do not take the above to exhaust possible relativist responses to the limits objection. Rather, I take the challenge from the limits of faultless disagreement to level the playing field. Once we consider a broader data-set which includes the *limits* of faultless disagreement, relativists do not—contrary to the arguments of Kölbel and others—have an explanatory advantage with respect to faultless disagreement. All theories, whether relativist, contextualist or absolutist,

²¹ What's more, any strong elaboration of refinement must be careful to remain consistent with the judgment that (1) is a case in which *both* subjects are faultless.

²² Furthermore, an attempt to relativise the notion of refinement itself would merely push the problem back one step: the relativist would then need to explain why it could not be "refined for Eve" to prefer *Three Blind Mice* to Beethoven's Fifth.

must meet serious challenges in order to have a viable account of faultless aesthetic disagreement—and relativism is no exception.

3 Setting Aside Epistemic Absolutism

Having shed doubt on the relativist's ability to explain faultless aesthetic disagreement, I move on to consider how the *absolutist* might respond to the initial challenge levelled in section one. Before I develop my positive absolutist view in section four, however, I will briefly explain why I am not minded to pursue one particular alternative approach which has recently been proposed.

One natural way for an aesthetic absolutist to account for faultless disagreement is to explain the appearance of faultlessness in epistemic terms—to claim that even though all aesthetic disagreements must involve some subject failing to believe truly, the beliefs of both subjects in a case like (1) might nevertheless achieve a sufficient degree of *epistemic value* for us to regard them as faultless. This view is in line with the minimal understanding of faultlessness I outlined at the end of section one: a faultless disagreement is described as a case in which both beliefs are above a certain key kind of criticism. One way to develop this epistemic view would be to argue that, in cases where we judge faultlessness, both subjects are *justified* in holding their contrary beliefs.²³

However, 'epistemic absolutist' views like these seem as much a *deflation* of the problem of faultless disagreement as an explanation of it. The possibility of disagreement in the presence of epistemic features such as 'joint justification' will, of course, be relatively uncontroversial if we are willing to accept that a belief can be justified but false.²⁴ But if this is the correct account of faultless disagreement, then it is a small step to concluding that faultless disagreements are possible in *all* areas of discourse. Consider case (3):

- (3) Dave: "A pint of milk costs 50p in the shop on the high street."
Eve: "No, a pint of milk costs 60p in that shop."

²³ This is the main component of the view defended by Schafer (2011).

²⁴ Indeed, the view will be completely untenable if we are not willing to accept this. If false beliefs cannot be justified then there can be no absolutist account of the faultlessness of (1) in terms of mutual justification.

Assume that Eve is correct—that a pint sells for 60p in the shop in question—and that her belief is justified. It is nevertheless easy to describe the case such that Dave's contrary belief is also justified. Perhaps he was told so by someone reliable and authoritative; perhaps the price was 50p until yesterday; etc. The disagreement in (3) is, it seems, consistent with 'joint justification'. But insofar as faultlessness is to be explained in terms of joint justification, we should, according to epistemic absolutists, think of case (3) as a faultless disagreement. This is not an isolated case—in any arbitrary case where disagreement is consistent with joint justification, epistemic absolutists seem committed to the possibility of faultless disagreement in that case. For the epistemic absolutist, then, faultless disagreement over aesthetic matters is simply an instantiation of the very broad phenomenon of mutual justification.

However, this consequence is at odds with the way that the problem of faultless disagreement is usually framed. Proponents of faultless disagreement present the phenomenon as one which is limited to a certain range of troublesome discourses—matters of taste, moral judgments, and epistemic modals, to name a few. That is, the appearance of faultlessness is taken to be one which *distinguishes* disagreements in certain domains from those in others. It is symptomatic of this that no contemporary relativist holds that faultless disagreement implies *global* relativism—which would presumably be the natural conclusion if the relevant notion of faultlessness extended to disputes concerning mundane matters such as the price of milk. Charity suggests, therefore, that proponents of faultless disagreement have in mind a concept which does not simply generalise to all areas of discourse. The claim of faultless disagreement is that disagreements over aesthetic matters, moral matters, etc., exhibit features which are not to be found in ordinary garden-variety disagreements. To endorse an epistemic absolutist explanation of faultless disagreement is to deny that there are any such features.

Now maybe these initial assumptions will turn out to be mistaken. Perhaps proponents of faultless disagreement are simply *wrong* about how far the phenomenon extends, and mistaken to think that it cannot be subsumed under existing epistemic concepts. But in endorsing an epistemic absolutist account of faultless disagreement we would be skipping a crucial step. Our primary task should be to investigate whether it is possible to give a positive account of faultless disagreement which takes the phenomenon at face value by accounting for its limited extent—that is, an account of absolutist faultless disagreement which does not equate aesthetic disagreements with disputes about the cost of milk. If such an account is available, it will present the strongest form of response to the relativist argument. If we must proliferate faultlessness, on the other hand, this amounts to a concession

that no absolutist account of a more exclusive notion of faultless disagreement can be given.²⁵

If—as I shall argue below—such an alternative absolutist account *is* available, then the best that an epistemic absolutist account will be able to provide is *another* way in which aesthetic disagreements can be faultless. But given that such an account will proliferate faultlessness across all areas of discourse, our attitude towards the epistemic view should be that it fails to highlight a notion of faultlessness which latches onto our original intuitions about the concept.

4 Developing Humean Absolutism

My central task in the remainder of this paper is to develop a new absolutist account of the aesthetic—Humean Absolutism—which respects both the possibility and limits of faultless disagreement. My goal is not to defend this view’s truth, but rather to establish its status as a viable option for aesthetic theory. This status will suffice to deal a further blow to the idea that faultless disagreement favours aesthetic relativism: even if relativism can satisfactorily explain the limits of faultless disagreement, the existence of an absolutist account with similar explanatory power rules out the exclusionary argument from faultless disagreement to relativism.

Humean Absolutism takes its lead from Hume’s arguments in his essay *Of the Standard of Taste*. It is important to emphasise, however, that exegesis of Hume is no part of my project here. In developing Humean Absolutism I do not claim to be giving an interpretation of Hume’s aesthetic theory—rather, my goal is to apply two of Hume’s key ideas within a truth-conditional framework. The result, as we will see, is a non-bivalent theory of aesthetic value which can account for both the existence of faultless disagreement and the limits of the phenomenon.²⁶

²⁵ Of course, a deflationary epistemic account will be more promising if it is coupled with a further argument as to why we should think that an ‘exclusive’ notion of faultless disagreement is not viable.

²⁶ Karl Schafer’s epistemic view of faultless disagreement contains a further proposal for a non-bivalent aesthetic theory (Schafer, 2011, pp.276-277). This component of his view is undeveloped, however, and little explanation of why truth-value gaps could contribute to an account of faultless aesthetic disagreement is provided. As such I start from scratch in the search for a non-bivalent account of faultless disagreement rather than attempting to build on Schafer’s brief comments on the matter.

The central principle of Humean Absolutism mirrors Hume's claim that the correctness of an aesthetic judgment is determined by the joint verdict of 'true judges' or 'ideal critics'.²⁷ Integrating this into truth-conditional semantics, Humean Absolutism claims that the *truth-values* of aesthetic judgments are determined by the convergence of ideal critics. A natural way to model this is in terms of HA₁:

(HA₁) An aesthetic proposition *p* is true iff ideal critics converge in judging that *p*.

There are two notions at use here which deserve further elucidation: 'ideal critic' and 'convergence'. First, what is an *ideal critic*? For Hume, ideal critics are defined by their possession of a key set of features: delicacy of taste, freedom from prejudice, practice with the relevant art(s), ability to compare different exemplars, and good sense (Hume 1757/1875, sect. 23). While we may wish to debate the necessity of certain of these features, or the sufficiency of their conjunction, this is a project for another time. I will take for granted the Humean account of the nature of ideal critics in what follows, although none of my arguments rest on this assumption. Second, what constitutes *convergence* between ideal critics? For ideal critics to converge on *p* does not require that *every* ideal critic endorses *p*, since ideal critics need not have a maximal set of aesthetic beliefs. As such, it is consistent with convergence on *p* that some ideal critics have no opinion on *p*. Convergence, then, requires only that each ideal critic who has made a verdict on *p* must endorse it.

In addition to HA₁, Humean Absolutism also endorses a second Humean principle. We will assume that, as Hume claims, insurmountable difference in human natures means that even ideal critics will sometimes diverge in their judgments:

"[T]here still remain two sources of variation, which are not sufficient indeed to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, but will often serve to produce a difference in the degrees of our approbation or blame. The one is the different humours of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country. [...] [W]here there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is entirely blameless on both sides, and leaves no room to give one the preference above the other; in that case a certain degree of diversity in judgment is unavoidable, and we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments." (Hume 1757/1875, sect. 28.)

²⁷ Hume (1757/1875), sect. 23. All such Humean views face the challenge of explaining *why* we should be beholden to the views of ideal critics—that is, of explaining why the views of ideal critics should be normative on our own judgments. I do not address this challenge here: for discussion, see Levinson (2002).

For our purposes, this amounts to the view that there are aesthetic judgments which some ideal critics accept but other ideal critics reject. As such, the status of an ideal critic cannot be cashed out simply in terms of endorsing all and only a certain set of judgments: there are some aesthetic matters on which the features of an ideal critic do not mandate any particular judgment.

With the above pair of assumptions, Humean Absolutism has it that (a) aesthetic truth is determined by the convergence of ideal critics; and (b) that ideal critics diverge over certain questions of aesthetic value. There are a number of ways in which these two Humean assumptions can be accommodated within an aesthetic theory. The version I develop here involves postulating *paracompleteness* in aesthetic truth.²⁸ However, given the assumption that ideal critics may diverge, there are two key choice-points which arise before we reach the paracomplete conclusion. First, we must adjudicate between HA₁ and a rival, HA₁*:

(HA₁*) An aesthetic proposition *p* is true iff there is some ideal critic who judges that *p*.

According to HA₁*, truth does not require the *convergence* of ideal critics—rather, endorsement from *one* ideal critic is sufficient for the truth of an aesthetic content. Ideal critics who diverge over *p* both speak the truth—and, in such cases of divergence, both *p* and not-*p* will be true.²⁹ One reason to be skeptical of HA₁* is as follows: if an aesthetic content *p* is true without qualification then I should be at fault (in some sense) for judging that not-*p*. But in the light of this, HA₁* suggests that an ideal critic is at fault for failing to believe both *p* and not-*p* in every case where ideal critics diverge, since both *p* and not-*p* are true in such a situation. This is an odd result, since we should not require—or even *allow*—ideal critics to have contradictory aesthetic beliefs. This can be easily avoided by restricting truth to the *convergence* of ideal critics, as HA₁ does.

Given that ideal critics can diverge, the Humean Absolutist must also adjudicate between two inequivalent definitions for the *falsity* of an aesthetic judgment, HA₂ and HA₂*:

²⁸ This approach is analogous, though not perfectly parallel, to supervaluational accounts of vagueness which hold that *p* is true iff it is true on all precisifications. For seminal discussions, see Fine (1975) and Keefe (2000).

²⁹ Such an approach would be analogous to the subvaluational approach to vagueness as defended by e.g. Hyde (1997). A paraconsistent approach to faultless disagreement is discussed by Beall (2006). Relatedly, in the aesthetic domain, see Cooke (2002).

(HA₂) An aesthetic proposition p is false iff ideal critics converge in judging that not- p .

(HA₂*) An aesthetic proposition p is false iff it is not the case that ideal critics converge in judging that p .

In conjunction with HA₁, either of these options would require us to reject a standard assumption. According to HA₂*, p is false when ideal critics fail to converge on p ; but the truth of not- p does not follow from this falsity, since not- p is true iff (as HA₁ decrees) ideal critics converge in judging that not- p . If ideal critics don't converge on p , it need not be the case that they converge on not- p ; so if we adopt HA₂* then p 's falsity does not entail the truth of not- p . Under HA₂, on the other hand, the principle of bivalence does not hold: since ideal critics might converge on neither p nor not- p , it may be the case that p is neither true nor false.

However, HA₂* has counterintuitive consequences: it not only implies that ideal critics will often have false beliefs, but it also seems to distribute the falsity rather oddly. In every case where there is divergence between ideal critics over p , those who judge p to be true will believe falsely and those who believe it to be false will believe truly. This odd result seems to privilege belief in the negation of aesthetic contents. HA₂, on the other hand, implies that divergence between ideal critics gives rise to a truth-value gap: neither p nor not- p is true in such a case, and as such no ideal critic believes falsely. Now a serious concern clearly remains here—namely, that some critics will have beliefs which are neither true nor false. Addressing this issue will be central to my arguments in the following section. However, on the basis of the above considerations, there is some reason to think that HA₁ and HA₂ is the most reasonable pair of principles for a Humean Absolutist to adopt.

This completes my outline of Humean Absolutism. My next task is to put the machinery to work in accounting for faultless disagreement.

5 Faultless Disagreement for Humean Absolutists

My goal is to show that the Humean Absolutist can endorse the following account of faultless disagreement:

(HAF) If ideal critics fail to converge on p and fail to converge on not- p then there can be faultless disagreement over p .

According to this principle, aesthetic disagreements can be faultless when they focus on matters over which ideal critics diverge. However, as pre-empted above, it is clear that there is a serious obstacle to this approach. (What follows is an adaptation of an argument found in Kölbel 2004.) Suppose that Dave judges that p and Eve judges that not- p . Suppose also that ideal critics diverge over p —some judge that p whilst others judge that not- p . As such, according to Humean Absolutism, neither p nor not- p is true. Does it not follow that *both* Dave and Eve are mistaken? After all, both have beliefs which are not true (because they are neither true nor false), which seems like a clear fault. In order to hold that this is a faultless disagreement, we will have to violate the following plausible principle:

(T) It is a mistake to believe a proposition which is not true.³⁰

Since Humean Absolutism is *not* to be considered an epistemic account of faultless disagreement, its conflict with (T) is an objection which must be addressed.³¹ Humean Absolutism will be unable to underwrite HAF as long as it upholds (T). However, I contend that there is a principled Humean Absolutist case for giving an addendum to (T). Relativists themselves must qualify (T), as we have seen: specifically, they must hold that it is a mistake to believe a proposition which is not true *according to one's own standard*. The Humean Absolutist's addendum to (T), on the other hand, will be as follows:

(HAT) It is a mistake to believe an aesthetic proposition which no ideal critic believes.

This transition is natural in the light of Humean Absolutism. If ideal critics are central to determining aesthetic value, it seems plausible that the overarching goal of aesthetic discourse is to become like an ideal critic in certain key respects. But if this is so, I need only aim to become like *one* ideal critic, rather than to become like the *convergence* of ideal critics; according to Humean Absolutism we do not even hold ideal critics to this latter standard. As such, I am not making a mistake when I believe an aesthetic proposition which accords with the judgments of some (but not all) ideal critics; such a belief should be entirely permissible since its possession is consistent with being an ideal critic. It follows that for the Humean Absolutist, aesthetic propositions which are not true but which nevertheless accord with the judgment of

³⁰ See López de Sa (2010) for a related argument given in terms of the norms of assertion.

³¹ Epistemic accounts of faultless disagreement hold that faultlessness is consistent with the kind of mistake involved in believing a proposition which is not true, so the proponents of such views will not be moved by a conflict with (T).

some ideal critic are belief-worthy. As such, the addition of HAT is well-motivated: the fundamentals of Humean Absolutism strongly suggest that one should not, in principle, be excluded from permissibly believing aesthetic propositions which lack truth-value.

In the light of the above, the Humean Absolutist should adopt a norm of belief resembling HA₃:

(HA₃) One should believe an aesthetic proposition p only if some ideal critic judges that p .

A corresponding norm should, presumably, be adopted for assertion. Of course, these norms will not form a complete picture and must be supplemented. Since ideal critics might diverge over p , a subject might believe both p and not- p —whilst refusing to endorse the conjunction—and nevertheless meet the requirements of HA₃. Because of this, we will need to at least add some kind of coherence constraint in order to give a complete account.³² Nevertheless, we may think of HA₃ as a *requirement* on permissible belief—even though it cannot be a *sufficient* condition for permissibility.

Adopting HAT, HA₂ and HA₃ allows us to see how the Humean Absolutism can endorse HAF. Let's consider (1) again:

(1) Dave: "Mozart is better than Beethoven."
Eve: "No, Beethoven is better than Mozart."

It seems plausible that at least one ideal critic would judge that Mozart is better than Beethoven and at least one would judge the converse—that is, it is natural to think that either view is consistent with being an ideal critic. As such, Humean Absolutism can endorse the possibility of faultlessness in (1). If ideal critics diverge in this way then, according to HA₁, neither of the contents expressed in (1) is true. Nevertheless, both Dave and Eve accord with the judgment of some ideal critic, and so both could have faultless beliefs.

³² One strategy here would be to characterize the norms in a holistic fashion, such that one should endorse a set of contents $\{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ only if that set is endorsed by some ideal critic. This would still allow for faultless disagreement, since the divergence assumption entails that some pairs of conflicting sets will each be endorsed by some ideal critic. However, this solution may entail that there are some sets of aesthetic contents which are entirely composed of truths but are nevertheless impermissible—given that ideal critics needn't have a maximal set of beliefs, it's possible for there to be two propositions p and q such that ideal critics converge on p and converge on q whilst no ideal critic believes *both* p and q . The plausibility of the proposed solution here will depend in part on whether we think that believing the conjunction in this situation should be permissible.

Moreover, Humean Absolutism can explain the *limits* of faultless disagreement as well as the *possibility* of the phenomenon. Consider again case (2):

(2) Dave: “Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is better than *Three Blind Mice*.”

Eve: “No, *Three Blind Mice* is better than Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.”

It seems plausible that *no* ideal critic would share Eve’s view that *Three Blind Mice* is a better work than Beethoven’s symphony. So with principle HAT in hand, Humean Absolutism can explain why (2) does not appear to be faultless: we can identify Eve’s fault with the failure of her judgment to accord with the view of *any* ideal critic. This represents a substantial improvement over the basic relativist account of faultless disagreement, which seemed unable to respect the limits of the phenomenon. Humean Absolutism allows us to endorse the possibility of faultless disagreement whilst still keeping that possibility relatively restricted. We can allow for various kinds of permissible divergence over aesthetic matters—differences arising from personal style or the conventions of conflicting genres, for example—whilst still allowing that there are *limits* to this permissible divergence. As such, we can endorse both elements of the faultlessness intuition.³³

Nevertheless, we might worry that in endorsing this account of faultlessness we undermine the plausibility of thinking of (1) as a *disagreement*. Consider an elaboration of the case according to which Dave *knows* that both he and Eve have judged in accordance with some ideal critic. This seems to remove a key reason he may have had to criticise Eve’s belief—and we may, as a result, think it implausible to say that he *disagrees* with Eve. In response to this we should recognise that the most important sense of disagreement is still applicable here. Dave’s and Eve’s beliefs are still such that they could not be true together, since ideal critics could not converge on both Dave’s judgment *and* Eve’s judgment. Accordingly, the propositions involved still rule each other out in the key sense required for a *state* of disagreement. Nevertheless, the issues surrounding disagreement as an *activity* are more complicated here. The Humean Absolutist may have to accept that it would, *ceteris*

³³ Humean Absolutism may also have sufficient resources to explain why the limits of faultless disagreement seem less clear in the case of gustatory taste. It seems plausible that a far broader range of views about what is *tasty* are consistent with possessing the features of an ideal critic—and thus that, according to HAT, faultless disagreement about what is tasty will be a much more permissive phenomenon than faultless disagreement about purely aesthetic matters. Humean Absolutism about taste would, then, also account for the sense in which it seems that there is *no fact of the matter* about many questions of taste.

paribus, be irrational to enter a dispute over whether Mozart is better than Beethoven—that in a situation like (1) the rational attitude for Dave and Eve to have towards one another is one of *tolerance*, since each subject’s view accords with an ideal critic. Accepting this amounts to a concession of sorts: it may follow from Humean Absolutism that there cannot be a faultless disagreement about which the participants can engage in a rational dispute. By way of mitigation, however, the Humean Absolutist can say that it is at best unclear whether either the relativist fares any better in this regard. Nevertheless, the Humean Absolutist is able to underwrite the most important sense in which cases like (1) involve disagreement in a way that is compatible with the idea of faultlessness.

Finally, the Humean Absolutist is well-placed to avoid the deflation of faultless disagreement which plagues epistemic absolutists. The proposed addendum to thesis (T) makes reference only to aesthetic contents. As such, the Humean Absolutist account of faultlessness is not in danger of entailing that disagreements in *all* areas of discourse could be faultless.

6 Belief in Truth-Value Gaps

A prime objection to Humean Absolutism arises from its permission of belief in truth-value gaps. It is a consequence of HAT that one may believe propositions which are neither true nor false, and *a fortiori* that one may believe propositions which are *not true*. This consequence puts Humean Absolutism at odds with general truth-norms for belief and assertion—norms which are often taken to be platitudinous.³⁴ One might worry that this conflict makes Humean Absolutism unacceptably revisionary. The problem can also be stated in a potentially stronger form. Ordinarily we would think that when I recognise that I disagree with someone, I will take their belief to be false. But if I recognise that my interlocutor accords with some ideal critic, then I should not (according to Humean Absolutism) also take my interlocutor’s belief to be false. Indeed, I must also recognise that my own belief is *not true*—since there is at least one ideal critic who disagrees with me (that is, the critic who agrees with my interlocutor), it cannot be the case that ideal critics converge on my judgment. As such, recognising faultlessness in these cases requires accepting that my own belief is not true. But—the challenge goes—if I recognise that my belief is not true, why would I continue to endorse it? In this section I will attempt to allay these worries.

³⁴ See e.g. Wright (1992), pp.23-24.

The issues here are exemplary of general concerns regarding the cognitive role of truth-value gaps and indeterminacy—that is, the question of what doxastic attitudes it is appropriate to take towards propositions which are neither true nor false. There are many domains in which this issue is live, since postulating truth-value gaps or indeterminacy seems at least initially plausible: examples include future contingents, the semantic paradoxes, counterfactuals, and vague predicates. In many of these areas, a no-truth-value account will run into conflict with truth-norms for belief and assertion. Consider the case of future contingents. If we accept a no-truth-value account of statements about the future, then abiding by a truth-norm like (T) has the counter-intuitive consequence that we should never believe statements about the future. As such, we may think that any positive motivation for a no-truth-value theory of future contingents would also be motivation to weaken the general truth-norms—specifically, to allow that beliefs and assertions about the future are sometimes permissible despite lacking truth-value. For instance, one might link the norms for thought and talk about the future to the available *evidence* about what the future holds, or to *future* truth-values rather than present truth-values. In general, then, positive reason to deny bivalence—in conjunction with certain discourse-specific factors—can put one in a position to revise the truth-norms.

More specifically, Humean Absolutism is in line with the view that indeterminacy gives rise to ‘normative silence’: the idea that in cases where a proposition lacks truth-value, there is no doxastic attitude that one is mandated to have towards that proposition.³⁵ Humean Absolutists have it that the central kind of doxastic obligation arises only in cases where ideal critics converge—and thus that it is absent whenever critics diverge. Since normativity of belief tracks the judgments of ideal critics, a case which exhibits a conflict between ideal critics will be a case where either judgment is normatively permitted. It does not follow that in such cases there will be *nothing* to say in favour of one judgment rather than another. For instance, even a belief-set whose each individual member accords with some ideal critic can come in for criticism if it fails to be coherent. The important point is that no doxastic requirements are inherited *merely* from a proposition’s status as a truth-value gap.

Humean Absolutists, then, should say that there is no reason for me to back down from my judgment upon realising that it is not true—that is, upon realising that some ideal critic rejects the content of that judgment. Upon learning this, I simply learn

³⁵ This account is developed in Williams (forthcoming), who follows Maudlin (2004). Maudlin endorses a no-truth-value view of the semantic paradoxes, but nevertheless claims that our norms of assertion and denial should allow for the assertion of some ‘ungrounded’ statements, such as “The Liar is not true”. (Maudlin 2004, pp.95-104.)

that the judgment is not *mandatory*. Humean Absolutists can also explain why I should be no less confident in this judgment than in those which I know to be *true*: since some ideal critic endorses the judgment's content, endorsing it is consistent with possessing the qualities which are constitutive of being an ideal critic. And since we are to think of the goals of engaging in aesthetic discourse in terms of either becoming an ideal critic or becoming *like* an ideal critic, I should thereby think that the judgment is no less permissible than one in which *all* ideal critics believe. Given that I should presumably also take this attitude towards the beliefs of my interlocutors, this also explains why Humean Absolutist faultless disagreements should arguably lead to tolerance of contrary opinions rather than challenge and dispute.

One final factor further mitigates the conflict of Humean Absolutism with the truth-norms. In endorsing alternative norms of belief and assertion for a particular non-bivalent discourse we need not thereby reject truth-norms across the board. In saying that propositions which lack truth-value can be assertible, for instance, we might be endorsing a *local* norm of assertion; that is, a norm which only governs assertions in a certain area of discourse. It's plausible that this is how we should think of the Humean Absolutist's strategy, since its norm of assertion refers only to *aesthetic* assertions. The Humean Absolutist is perfectly at liberty to retain the truth-norm for general discourse whilst contesting its claim to be a *global* norm of assertion. Similarly, a no-truth-value theorist of future-contingents might link the assertibility of future contingents to evidence, but retain truth-norms for present-tense and past-tense assertions. This keeps the core of the truth-norms whilst simultaneously providing a satisfactory account of belief and assertion for our non-bivalent discourse.

7 Conclusion

The central results of this paper are twofold. Firstly, relativism does not have a clear advantage when it comes to explaining faultless aesthetic disagreement. Like its absolutist and contextualist rivals, relativism must answer a serious challenge before we can be sure that it can account for the full range of intuitions associated with the phenomenon—specifically, it must provide an adequate account of the *limits* of faultless disagreement. Secondly, a coherent *absolutist* view of faultless aesthetic disagreement and its limits is available—and, moreover, such an account can be given without reducing faultless disagreement to a mere epistemic matter which extends to disagreements in all domains of discourse.

My above arguments do not show that we should *adopt* Humean Absolutism—rather, the goal has been to defend its coherence and thus shed further doubt on the claim that faultless disagreement favours relativism. Nevertheless, insofar the benefits that Humean Absolutism provides are unique—an account which respects the limits of faultless disagreement without collapsing the concept into epistemic matters—it should be considered a leading theory in the debate.³⁶

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