

Faultless Disagreement and Aesthetic Realism

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Abstract: It has recently been argued that certain areas of discourse, such as discourse about matters of taste, involve a phenomenon of “faultless disagreement” that rules out giving a standard realist or contextualist semantics for them. Thus, it is argued, we are left with no choice but to consider more adventurous semantic alternatives for these areas, such as a semantic account that involves relativizing truth to perspectives or contexts of assessment. I argue that the sort of faultless disagreement present in these cases is in fact compatible with a realist treatment of their semantics. Then I briefly consider other considerations that might be thought to speak against realism about these areas of discourse. I conclude with the tentative suggestion that realism about matters of taste is far more plausible (at least in some cases) than most philosophers believe today.

Recently, several philosophers have argued that certain areas of discourse, including discourse about matters of taste, systematically resist characterization in either traditional realist or contextualist terms. As Max Kölbel characterizes it, the central feature of these areas of discourse is that they allow for the possibility of what he calls “faultless disagreement”.¹ That is, they allow for cases of real disagreement where neither party is intuitively “mistaken”. The existence of this phenomenon in these areas of discourse, Kölbel argues, is incompatible with realist approaches to them because realism demands that wherever there is a disagreement between two parties (and no indeterminacy is present) at least one party must be mistaken.² Similarly, the existence of such disagreements is incompatible with contextualist approaches to these areas of discourse, since to the degree that contextualism diverges from realism, it delivers the result that the parties in question do not actually disagree with one another at all.³ Thus, according to Kölbel, in order to construct a semantic theory that deals satisfactorily with the nature of aesthetic discourse, we need to look beyond these traditional semantic approaches to a semantic approach of a more radical sort - one that, Kölbel suggests, will relativize, the truth of utterances, not just to the context in which they are uttered, but also to the perspective or context from which their truth is assessed.⁴ In short, according to Kölbel, in order to generate an accurate

¹In particular, see his “Faultless Disagreement”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (October 2003) 104, 53-73. See also his *Truth without Objectivity*, London: Routledge (2002). A similar line of thought has been developed by John MacFarlane. See, for example, his “Making Sense of Relative Truth,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005), 3213. There are important differences between Kölbel’s and MacFarlane’s accounts of relativism, but for the purposes of the points I’ll be making here, these differences are not terribly significant. For my main aim is to demonstrate the compatibility of “faultless disagreement” with realism and not to analyze any particular form of relativism. For an influential discussion of some related issues, see Crispin Wright’s “On Being in a Quandary: Relativism, Vagueness, Logical Revisionism”, *Mind* (2001) 110, 45-9.

²This, as will become clear, involves a very broad definition of realism - one that includes within its scope certain positions that are often regarded as anti-realist, such as many response-dependent views and certain sophisticated forms of expressivism.

³Quasi-realist forms of expressivism, according to Kölbel, do no better than straightforward realism in dealing with these issues. Whether or not this is the case, as should become clear, I believe that realist and (quasi-realist) expressivist approaches to these issues have the same resources to deal with the phenomena Kölbel discusses.

⁴Kölbel prefers to speak of relativizing truth to “perspectives”, while MacFarlane prefers to speak of relativizing truth to “contexts of assessment”. For our discussion here, the differences between these two options won’t be terribly important. What is important is the idea - common currency between Kölbel and MacFarlane - that in making an utterance concerning matters of taste one expresses a proposition, the truth of which is not fixed by the context of utterance, but instead shifts from one perspective or context

semantic picture of those areas of discourse in which faultless disagreement is possible, we have to accept a semantics that allows for the possibility that the truth of the propositions expressed by these utterances may shift from one perspective or context of assessment to another.

In what follows, I argue that the phenomena Kölbel discusses are in fact compatible with a traditional realist semantics for the areas of discourse in which they appear. In part, this will involve arguing that the degree of “faultlessness” that is present in these cases is less great than Kölbel’s discussion sometimes suggests. But for the most part, I will accept that there is an important sort of faultlessness present in the cases Kölbel discusses. What I hope to show is that once this faultlessness is properly understood, it can be seen to be primarily epistemic in character. Thus, I will argue, accommodating it does not require the radical semantic measures that Kölbel discusses - rather, we may accurately represent the nature of these sorts of disagreements without deviating from a fully realist treatment of the semantics of the areas of discourse in which they occur.

This, I hope, will go some way towards defusing the temptation, common in contemporary discussion of these issues, to think that a fully satisfying philosophical treatment of these areas of discourse requires fancy semantic footwork. But it also should go some distance toward providing a defense of the idea that *even* areas of discourse like discourse about beauty and other matters of taste might be amenable, at least in part, to realist semantic treatment. In closing, I discuss some considerations that might be thought to speak against this sort of approach, with an eye towards defusing the suspicion that a realist account of these issues is simply untenable from the start.

How, then, should we understand the phenomenon of faultless disagreement, which is the focus of Kölbel’s account? The paradigm of faultless disagreement is, for Kölbel, is the following sort of case. Suppose we consider two individuals, Olivia and Felicity, who have differing opinions about some aesthetic issue, as follows:

- (1) Olivia believes that Matisse is better than Picasso.
- (2) Felicity believes that Picasso is better than Matisse.
- (3) Both Olivia and Felicity have had ample opportunity to sample the works of both artists and have given the matter sufficient consideration.

of assessment to another.

Kölbel wishes us to note two features about cases of this sort. First, that they seem to involve real disagreement. That is, it seems that what Olivia believes about Matisse and Picasso is incompatible with what Felicity believes about them. For Olivia could not accept the proposition that Felicity believes, while maintaining her current beliefs, without entering into a logically inconsistent state.

In this way, the objects of Olivia's and Felicity's beliefs seem to have the features that characterize straightforward cases of factual disagreement. But there is another feature of their case that differs from many, or perhaps all, cases of disagreement about matters of empirical fact. This feature is what Kölbel calls "faultlessness", which - according to Kölbel - consists in the fact that, "Olivia and Felicity each have exactly the view they ought to have on the question of whether Matisse is better than Picasso, and .. for both of them changing their belief would constitute a mistake."⁵

I think there is an important sense in which Kölbel is right about both these points. But what exactly are the implications of them for the proper semantic characterization of areas of discourse in which such "faultless disagreements" are possible? In considering this, we may, following Kölbel, distinguish between three main semantic possibilities: realism, contextualism, relativism.⁶

These three possibilities, for our purposes here, may be distinguished by the accounts they give of the truth values of the proposition that Olivia and Felicity believe:

Realists suppose that, barring garden-variety indeterminacy or vagueness, at least one of these beliefs must be false. And they suppose that whenever someone believes something false, this belief is (in an intuitive sense) mistaken. That is, the realist about some area of discourse D will accept the following principle about D:

⁵"Faultless Disagreement", 56

⁶Here (for the most part) I leave a further sort of semantic theory to the side: expressivism. As I noted above, this is mainly because I doubt whether expressivism (of a defensible sort) represents a real alternative to realism about the areas of discourse in question with respect to the issues under discussion. But whether or not this is correct, the account of faultless disagreement I give below should be available to sophisticated forms of expressivism just as much as it is to the realist who will be my focus in what falls. So expressivists should, I think, be able to respond to Kölbel's challenge using the tools I provide here.

Of course, there are additional semantic possibilities here. I focus on the three noted above because they are the focus of Kölbel's discussion. Another interesting possibility is what John Macfarlane has called "non-indexical contextualism". But if my arguments are successful in showing that "faultless disagreement" does not require relativism, they will also show that there is no pressure in the direction of non-indexical contextualism from this phenomenon.

(SOMEONE MUST BE MISTAKEN) When two parties disagree about some question within D, and no interderminacy is present, it must be the case that at least one of them is mistaken.

For example, a realist will suppose that there is a straightforward fact of the matter about whether Matisse is better than Picasso. And he will suppose that this fact determines the truth or falsity of Olivia and Felicity's belief just as in a case of straightforward factual disagreement.

In what follows, it is important to keep in mind that this definition of "realism" is extremely broad. For example, response-dependent accounts of aesthetic properties will count as realist by this standard insofar as they accept that there are standards of correctness (perhaps provided by an ideal responder) that apply to the responses in question. Moreover, sophisticated forms of quasi-realist expressivism, which allow for the application of a disquotational truth predicate to the discourses they characterize, will also count as realist by this standard - at least in so far as they accept (which many quasi-realists do) that believing something disquotationally false involves a mistake in some sense.

Contextualists, on the contrary, suppose that the contents of Olivia and Felicity's beliefs are context sensitive in some (to-be-determined) manner that allows for them *both* to be true. So while a contextualist may accept (SOMEONE MUST BE MISTAKEN), he does not believe that it applies to the sorts of cases we are considering. For, appearances notwithstanding, in these cases there is no real disagreement present. Rather, in these cases, the appearance of disagreement conceals the expression by both parties of propositions whose truth is compatible with one another.

For example, a contextualist account of these beliefs might claim that the full content of Olivia's belief is that Olivia prefers Matisse to Picasso, while the full content of Felicity's belief is that Felicity prefers Picasso to Matisse. In which case, it would plainly be possible for both Felicity's belief and Olivia's belief to be true simultaneously.

Relativists accept neither of these alternatives, claiming instead that neither Olivia's nor Felicity's belief should be regarded as true or false *simpliciter* from a semantic point of view. Rather, according to the relativist, when doing formal semantics, we should regard these beliefs as true or false only *relative to some perspective or context of assessment from which their truth or falsity is assessed*. For example, the relativist will claim that Olivia's belief is true *relative to Olivia's context of assessment* but false *relative to Felicity's*, and

visa versa. So, according to the relativist, the truth or falsity of such beliefs is not fixed by the context of the believer (or utterer). Rather, it is only fixed when we specify the context of the believer and the context or perspective from which the truth of the belief is being assessed.⁷

This gives the relativist a mechanism for rejecting the realist principle (SOMEONE MUST BE MISTAKEN). For the relativist can claim that beliefs like Olivia's and Felicity's are mistaken only when they are false relative to the *believer's* context of assessment. And it is easy for the relativist to give an account of the truth and falsity of aesthetic beliefs from which it follows that Olivia's beliefs are true relative to Olivia's context of assessment and Felicity's beliefs are true relative to Felicity's context of assessment. In which case, the relativist may be a position to claim that neither of their beliefs is mistaken in any interesting sense.

Now, it is worth stressing here that the notion of relative truth that the relativist makes use in making this claim differs in some important regards from what most of us would regard as our ordinary truth predicate. For example, most would agree that the ordinary truth predicate obeys the equivalence scheme: P is true iff P. But this scheme does not even make sense for a truth-predicate that is relativized to perspectives or contexts of assessment. So the relativist's relativized truth predicate should be distinguished from the ordinary truth predicate that does obey this scheme.⁸

Of course, the relativist should allow that Olivia and Felicity may make use of a truth predicate that does respect the standard equivalence scheme. And he should also allow that, with respect to *this* predicate, each of them must judge the other's belief to be false. For each of them will be forced into this judgment by their own aesthetic beliefs, plus the equivalence scheme. But this, for the relativist, need not imply that either Olivia or Felicity regards the other's belief as mistaken in any normative sense. For, according to the relativist, the truth of judgments about the "ordinary" (equivalence-scheme-based) truth or falsity of beliefs like Olivia's and Felicity's will themselves vary from one context of assessment to another. Thus, according to the relativist, judgments about this sort of truth and falsity do not represent the deep semantic facts active in cases like this. For these facts, according to the relativist, do not involve the "ordinary" (equivalence-scheme-based)

⁷Again, Kölbel's terminology and MacFarlane's differs somewhat here, but we can abstract away from differences between them with respect to the general point under consideration.

⁸What the relativist can allow, of course, is that his truth predicate obeys the related scheme: P is true relative to my context of assessment iff P.

truth or falsity of Felicity and Olivia's beliefs, but rather their truth or falsity *relative to various contexts of assessment*. Thus, according to the relativist, neither Olivia nor Felicity should infer from the "ordinary" falsity of the other's belief that the other is mistaken *in any normative sense*. For, according to the relativist, one's belief is mistaken only when one believes something that is false *relative to one's own context of assessment*.

If this is correct, then unlike the realist, the relativist is in a position to capture the sense in which Olivia and Felicity's disagreement is a *faultless* one. But can he capture the sense in which they genuinely disagree with one another? The relativist can at least say something in response to this question that the contextualist cannot. For the relativist can accept that this case does involve a proposition - namely, that Matisse is better than Picasso - that Olivia accepts and Felicity rejects.

Still, since the proposition in question is, according to the relativist, only true or false relative to a context of assessment, it might be doubted whether the disagreement between Olivia and Felicity concerning whether to accept it is really a genuine disagreement after all. This raises some difficult questions about what should count as an instance of genuine disagreement, but I don't want to pursue this line of criticism of the relativist's position here. So I'll take it for granted that the relativist's account does in fact capture the sort of disagreement we intuitively take to be present in these cases.⁹

Given this, Kölbel argues, only relativism is compatible with the existence of real faultless disagreement. For a contextualist account of Olivia and Felicity's "disagreement" actually implies that there is no disagreement present between them at all in the intuitive sense laid out above. And a realist account of their disagreement, while allowing that it involves a real disagreement, forces us to say of them that one of them is wrong and the other is right, which precludes the existence of real faultlessness.

⁹Against this, it has been suggested to me that one might make the following point. The relativist himself will presumably have his own views about which one of Matisse and Picasso is the better artist. Say, for the sake of argument, that he agrees with Olivia that Matisse is the better artist. Then, given his relativism, he is committed to the following claim about his disagreement with Felicity:

(R) Felicity believes that Picasso is better than Matisse, but Picasso is not better, and yet there is no (normative) sense in which Felicity is mistaken.

But, the objection concludes, whatever we think of the coherence of such claims, they are surely not the sort of thing that comes naturally to us in the case under discussion. Thus, it seems plausible that the relativist's position does not accurately characterize the sort of disagreement present in these cases.

There is a great deal of debate about whether relativism, as described by Kölbel, is really a coherent semantic possibility.¹⁰ And there is also room to wonder whether relativism really does any better at capturing real faultless disagreement than, say, realism does. But what I want to focus on is the question of how a realist might deal with the cases Kölbel discusses. That is, I want to consider just how much “faultlessness” we can admit in these cases, while remaining realists about them in the sense defined above. In the end, I will argue, the sort of faultlessness present is, contrary to Kölbel, perfectly compatible with realism.

So, in just what sense is the disagreement between Olivia and Felicity a faultless one? Following Kölbel, I think we should at least acknowledge that the following two things are true of this disagreement:

(4) There is a sense in which both Olivia and Felicity have exactly the view they ought to have on this issue.

(5) There is a sense in which it is true of both of them that changing their belief about this matter would constitute a mistake.

Now, assuming for the moment a realistic approach to the semantics of aesthetic discourse, let’s consider what might make these two claims true.

To understand why they might be true, even for a realist, suppose first that each individual - to varying degrees - has various first-order beliefs about which things are beautiful and which are not. So, for example, Olivia believes that Matisse’s work is more beautiful than Picasso’s. And Felicity believes that Picasso’s more beautiful than Matisse’s. But, in addition, each individual will also accept certain *second-order norms* concerning how to form these first-order beliefs. These norms will be (roughly) functions from one’s basic aesthetic responses or aesthetic sensibility to one’s aesthetic beliefs. I.e. they will say things like the following: “When your response to some work of art is R, all other things being equal, form belief B about this work of art.”

In this way, these norms will be like the norms we accept concerning how to respond to our perceptual experiences in forming new empirical beliefs. They are norms that determine

¹⁰See, for example, Jason Stanley’s discussion in *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (2005) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

which beliefs about aesthetic matters we take to be, in some sense, rational, given a certain sort of aesthetic sensibility.¹¹

If I'm coherent, I will accept a second-order norm for aesthetic belief formation, N, that maps my current aesthetic sensibility to my current aesthetic beliefs. But N may map *other* possible aesthetic sensibilities to *different* aesthetic beliefs. In fact, all the second-order norms that seem reasonable will do just this. Any reasonable norm N will tell one to form different beliefs about beauty (in some cases, at least) if one has different aesthetic responses or experiences. For any reasonable norm for the formation of aesthetic beliefs will be sensitive to some degree to one's own aesthetic experience.

With this machinery in place, we can think about the case of Olivia and Felicity as follows. Olivia and Felicity have different first-order aesthetic beliefs. But this does not mean that they have different second order norms of the sort just described. In fact, given the way the case is described, it seems most reasonable to think of them as sharing roughly the same second-order norm N, which takes one from aesthetic sensibilities to first-order aesthetic beliefs. For, given the way the case is described it is natural to think that their different responses to Picasso and Matisse are rooted in a difference in their aesthetic experiences of things, and not in a difference in how they think one should respond to one's aesthetic experiences, whatever they are.

Now suppose Felicity is trying to evaluate Olivia's aesthetic beliefs. Then given what I've said so far, there are two perspectives from which she may make this evaluation:

(i) Felicity can evaluate Olivia using Felicity's first-order aesthetic beliefs as her standard. In which case, she will reach the conclusion that Olivia believes something that is (in an ordinary everyday sense) false. And thus, she will conclude that Olivia is, in fact, making a mistake - since she believes something false, and, for a *realist* at least, believing something false always involves *some* sort of mistake.

Or (ii) Felicity can evaluate Olivia using Felicity's second-order norm N as her standard, which will involve evaluating how well Olivia responds to her (Olivia's) aesthetic sensibility in forming aesthetic beliefs. In which case, Felicity will see that Olivia is responding to this sensibility in just the way she herself would do were she in Olivia's situation - since both Olivia and Felicity accept the same second-order norm for the formation of aesthetic

¹¹I'm describing these second-order states in terms of norms because I find that natural. But this isn't essential - i.e. if you prefer to think of them as beliefs about which aesthetic beliefs would be justified or reasonable given a particular aesthetic sensibility that would work as well.

beliefs. And so she will positively evaluate Olivia's aesthetic beliefs. I.e. in this sense, she will say that Olivia is *not* making a mistake, thereby expressing her acceptance of a second-order norm that agrees with what Olivia is doing in responding to her aesthetic sensibility as she does.

In an ideal world, we would use different words to express these two different sorts of evaluation (and arguably we do). So, for example, we might call an aesthetic view "true" to express this view's agreement with our first-order aesthetic beliefs (ignoring the individual's aesthetic sensibility). And we might call someone's aesthetic beliefs "reasonable" or "justified" (or even, in a stipulative sense "correct") to express the agreement of these beliefs with the output of our second-order norms *given* the individual's aesthetic sensibility.

The important point is that this *alone* would give us "faultless disagreement" *in the sense laid out above*. For example, in the case of Olivia and Felicity, according to this picture of things, there is a sense in which both Olivia and Felicity should agree that *both* of them have exactly the aesthetic beliefs they should have - for both of them, given their distinct aesthetic sensibilities, have the aesthetic beliefs prescribed by the second-order norm for aesthetic belief formation that they share. And, moreover, both of them *would* be violating this norm if they changed their aesthetic beliefs (without their aesthetic sensibility also shifting). So we can also say of them that there is a sense in which any alteration in their views *would* constitute a mistake. Thus, on the account just sketched, both (4) and (5) will hold of Olivia and Felicity.

But in order to say all this, we need *not* claim that *both* of their beliefs are true only *relative to some context of assessment*. And we need *not* say that there is *no* normatively-significant sense in which, say, Olivia's beliefs are mistaken. For we may also maintain that any false belief (in this sense) involves a normatively-significant mistake in the first of the two senses laid out above. And so, if we believe that Olivia's beliefs are false in the ordinary, equivalence-scheme-based, sense of the word, we may contain to maintain that she is making a mistake in this sense. Thus, we can maintain the connection, which relativists like Kölbel deny, between a belief being false in this ordinary sense and it being a mistake of a normatively-significant kind.

This way of characterizing the sort of faultlessness involved in these cases does not require that we deviate in any way from a straightforwardly realist semantics for them. For according to the characterization just given, the sort of faultlessness at issue is entirely

due to the fact that both parties accept a second-order norm that prescribes both of their responses to their own aesthetic sensibilities. Thus, in a sense, both parties accept that the other's response to their aesthetic sensibility is a justified or appropriate one, and this is a matter of the epistemic or rational standing of Olivia and Felicity's beliefs and *not* the semantic values of them.

Nonetheless, it would be entirely natural from a realist point of view to describe Olivia and Felicity's disagreement as a "faultless" one. For while the realist is committed to viewing one of them as mistaken, he need not view either of them as being *at fault*. After all, we are not at fault for every mistake we make. And, in particular, when someone forms a false, but justified belief by reacting as they should to their own first-person experience of the world, we generally do not take them to be responsible for this mistake. Rather than taking them to be at fault, we simply view them as unlucky.

In this way, the sense in which Olivia will regard Felicity as faultless for her aesthetic beliefs is quite similar to the sense in which we would regard the beliefs of someone who was subject to deceptive perceptual experiences as faultless. Of course, we would judge such an individual's beliefs to be false, but we might nonetheless view these beliefs as a maximally rational response to his experiences. Similarly, I would suggest Olivia should regard Felicity's beliefs as false (in the very same sense) but nonetheless should regard these beliefs as an appropriate response to Felicity's aesthetic experience of the world.

This, I submit is how a realist should attempt to accommodate the phenomena that Kölbel discusses. The realist should admit that their disagreement is a faultless one - for they are both responding to their own aesthetic sensibilities in the manner that they should. But nonetheless one of them has made a mistake insofar as she has simply gotten the aesthetic facts wrong.

But is this how we actually regard aesthetic discourse? When we look carefully at our attitudes toward such discourse, it is not difficult to find evidence that it is. For while it is often alleged that we do not regard someone who disagrees with us about some matter of taste as mistaken in *any* sense so long as their opinion is justified given their aesthetic sensibility and experience, across a wide range of cases this is simply false. After all, as Hume famously observed:

"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 Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean.”¹²

Hume’s claim is that certain aesthetic judgments involve just as clear and obvious a mistake as do the most mistaken judgments of empirical fact. And in this he seems to be exactly right. As it happens, we are quite willing to regard someone who disagrees with us about a matter of taste as mistaken, even when their views are supported by their aesthetic experience. For in many cases we are quite willing to regard others’ aesthetic experiences as mistaken, defective, or (as Hume puts it) “erroneous”. So the realist’s description of the sort of faultlessness present in disputes about aesthetic matters actually fits our practice far better than would an account, like the relativist’s, that would have it that cases like these do not involve a mistake in any normatively significant sense of the term.

Of course, it is true that there are other cases in which we are much more hesitant to view those who disagree with us as mistaken. But this does not mean that there are *no* objective standards that apply to matters of taste. Rather, it only indicates that there are limits to how far these standards extend. And the existence of such limits is fully compatible with a realist account of these issues, so long as the realist is willing to admit that there are cases in which there is no fact of the matter about whether one work of art is more beautiful than another or about whether one of two dishes is more delicious. But any sane form of aesthetic realism will acknowledge that there are cases of this sort - cases where the aesthetic facts, however these are understood, fail to determine a correct answer to the question under dispute. So it should come as no surprise to find the aesthetic realist endorsing a view of this sort in some cases. What is crucial here is that there are a wide range of aesthetic disputes, with respect to which we are inclined to apply the language of mistake and error that is central to the realist’s account. And thus there are a wide range of such disputes that have the qualities that indicate the existence of an acknowledged aesthetic fact of the matter in just the way the realist’s account implies.

Here, though, the opponent of realism is certain to insist that it is entirely compatible with his view that there be some, and in fact many, cases in which an aesthetic disagreement does involve some mistake by one of the parties. All he needs to make his case against the realist is a single case of genuine aesthetic disagreement in which it is plausible that there is no indeterminacy and that neither party is mistaken in *any* sense. For if any such case can be found it will be sufficient to undermine the realist’s position.

¹² “Of the Standard of Taste”, 230-1.

So it is really plausible that *no* such case exists? More plausible than it might seem. In particular, I want to suggest that the realist can and should insist that in every case of genuine aesthetic disagreement either one of the parties to the disagreement is mistaken (in the relevant sense) or there is a sufficient degree of indeterminacy present to make it the case that there is no fact of the matter about the issue under dispute.

Of course, even when such indeterminacy is present, the realist will be committed to the claim that at least one of the parties in any dispute is mistaken *in some sense*. After all, suppose there is no fact of the matter about whether Matisse really is better than Picasso. Then, while neither Olivia's nor Felicity's belief about this issue will be false, both of their beliefs will not be true. And while believing something that is merely untrue, as opposed to false, is surely better than believing something false, it is plausible that such beliefs do constitute a mistake, at least by the realist's lights.¹³¹⁴ So when such indeterminacy is present, strictly speaking neither Olivia nor Felicity will be getting things right about the issue in dispute. Still, the sort of mistake that each of them is making in this case is of a weaker sort than the mistake they would make if they had believed something false.

For instance, consider Felicity and Olivia's dispute. Some readers may feel that this is a case in which it is plausible that neither party is mistaken in any sense.¹⁵ As just noted, the realist cannot accommodate this intuition completely. But he can claim that this is a case in which neither view is determinately correct. And if he does, he can claim that the only mistake either party is making in this case is the sort of mistake one makes when one has a determinate belief about a question that does not have a determinate answer.

Does this do enough to address the sense we may have that neither party is *really* mistaken in cases like this one? To me it seems quite plausible that it does. In effect, the realist is claiming that in an aesthetic context, terms like *better* or *worse* impose at best a *partial* ordering on the space of artists and

¹³One might question this claim in cases of indeterminacy like the one under discussion, but for the sake of argument, I'm happy to grant it here.

¹⁴Also note that to say this is *not* to say that the parties are not disagreeing with one another. I may disagree with you about whether someone is bald even in a case in which it is indeterminate whether or not this is the case.

¹⁵Personally I do not find this plausible. (Hint: it's Picasso.) But that's an issue for another time.

works of art. And he is claiming that in cases in which this ordering does not deliver a verdict about two artists, we should regard claims about which artist is better as simply being indeterminate in truth value.¹⁶

Again this strikes me as the wrong view to take of the claim that Matisse is better than Picasso. But if we are convinced that neither Felicity nor Olivia's view about this question is *really* mistaken in the way it would be if it were false, then it seems to me an extremely reasonable position to take on their dispute. Still, if the realist does make these claims about their disagreement, he certainly owes us an explanation of why Felicity and Olivia behave in the manner they do - for we do not in general argue with one another in cases of clear indeterminacy. Baldness has never inspired the debate that beauty has.

One possible response to this challenge would be to note that it may not be obvious to Felicity and Olivia that the question they are debating has no determinately correct answer. But even if both Felicity and Olivia recognize that their claims, taken literally, are neither determinately true nor false, there is a natural pragmatic explanation of why they might nonetheless make them to each other.

In particular, it is very plausible that we sometimes say of something that it was beautiful when we really intend to communicate only that we liked it. And a term like "beautiful" can fulfill this role, whether or not our claims involving it are determinately true. That is, in many communicative contexts, it is possible to make a claim about beauty that is not (determinately) true, and nonetheless communicate information to our audience in a manner that is no way misleading.¹⁷ Thus, although the realist is committed to viewing cases like this one as cases of indeterminacy, he can still give a natural pragmatic explanation of our arguments concerning them, without deviating from a straightforward realist account of their semantics.

Still, as the analogy with the perceptual case indicates, giving a realist characterization of such disputes does carry with it certain commitments. In particular, if we give this sort of characterization of Olivia and Felicity's dispute, we will have to regard at least one of their aesthetic sensibilities as systematically misleading about the truth concerning

¹⁶One might worry that taking this line would weaken the realism of the realist's position to an unacceptable degree. But this will only be true if the scope of indeterminacy at issue here is very large. And I don't see anything in the considerations under discussion that indicates that this must be the case.

¹⁷It is such non-literal uses of terms like "beautiful" that makes contextualism about these terms as plausible as it is. But the fact that we often make use of these terms to communicate the sort of information - information about our own likes and dislikes - should not be confused with the claim that the literal meaning of these terms is what a contextualist claims it is.

matters of taste. And, in some cases, this may seem like too high a cost. But, for the reasons just noted, I doubt that it is in general an unacceptable one. After all, unless we have already been convinced by philosophical arguments for aesthetic anti-realism, most of us begin with a sense that at least *certain* individuals' aesthetic experience of the world is deeply misleading about which things really are and really are not beautiful.

Moreover, as I noted above, the sort of realism being defended here is compatible with giving a classical response-dependence account of the aesthetic qualities in question. And it also is compatible with many forms of quasi-realism about these matters. So it is not as if giving a broadly realist account of these issues requires one to endorse a robust, "red-blooded" realism about them. Rather, all it requires is that one accept that at least one of Felicity and Olivia is making a mistake in normatively-significant sense, at least insofar as their dispute is not simply a case of indeterminacy as described above.

If this is correct, then the realist can give an account of the sort of faultlessness present in these cases, after all. But perhaps there are reasons to prefer a semantic characterization of this sort of faultlessness (like the one given by the relativist) to the epistemic characterization of it I have just offered.

A relativist might agree with much of my characterization of the nature of Olivia and Felicity's disagreement. In fact, I think he should. But he might nonetheless insist that this characterization is incomplete as it stands. For he might argue that one of the aims of giving a formal semantics for some area of discourse is to systematize the norms governing this area of discourse.¹⁸ And, he might insist, the norms that this notion should systematize include, not just the first-order norms concerning truth and falsity in the sense governed by the equivalence scheme, but also the sorts of second-order norms that are responsible for the sense in which Olivia and Felicity's disagreement is a faultless one. Thus, he might conclude, we have a satisfactory semantic picture of Olivia and Felicity's disagreement only if our semantic picture encodes within it the second-order agreement between Olivia and Felicity - and the only way to do this effectively is make use some sort of notion of relative truth.¹⁹

¹⁸This seems to me a very intuitive idea. Surely one of the reasons we are interested in giving a formal semantics for an area of discourse is that we intend to make use of this formal semantics to describe the norms that govern assertion, retraction, and the like within this area of discourse.

¹⁹In correspondence, Kölbel has suggested something like this line of response to me.

I agree that the realist's semantic characterization of aesthetic discourse does not fully capture these sorts of second-order norms. And I agree that one salient way to capture them semantically would be to give a relativist semantics for aesthetic discourse. But it is far from obvious to me that these are the sorts of norms that *semantics* is in the business of systematizing. To see why one might be skeptical about this, compare the case under discussion once again with the case of disagreement about normal empirical matters of fact. Here too there will be disagreements that are "faultless" insofar as both parties are following the same second-order norms governing the formation of empirical beliefs on the basis of perceptual experience. But we do *not* see this as giving us any reason to move from a realist characterization of these areas of discourse to a relativist one. Rather, we simply say that the second-order agreement in such cases is epistemic, and not semantic, in character - and leave our realist semantics for the discourse untouched. So, at least in these cases, we do not take the aim of the semanticist to be the systematization of the second-order norms that govern an area of discourse or thought. Rather, we think that the task of systematizing *these* norms - the task, in other words, of saying how we should respond in belief to such-and-such a perceptual experience - is the job of the epistemologist and not the semanticist.

The question for the relativist is why we should not do the same in the case of aesthetic discourse. That is, why shouldn't we similarly say in this case that the task of the semanticist does not include within it the systematization of the second-order norms that govern how we respond to our aesthetic experience of the world. Or, in other words, why shouldn't we regard the task of systematizing these norms to be the job of the epistemologist, just as it was in the standard perceptual case?

In closing, then, I want to briefly discuss some of the apparent differences between the aesthetic case and the perceptual case that seem to be responsible for the tendency to treat these cases differently. Some of such differences I have already discussed. But there are several more that deserve discussion here.

First, there is the fact that it can appear that we are generally more tolerant of disagreement in the aesthetic case than we are in the empirical case. Second, there is the fact that we do not seem to give testimony concerning matters of taste the same weight that we give testimony concerning empirical matters, if in fact we give it any weight at all. And, finally, there is the worry that aesthetic realism makes it impossible to provide a plausible,

non-skeptical epistemology in the aesthetic case.

Let's take these alleged differences between these cases in turn, beginning with the first, to see whether any of them give us a clear reason to treat these cases differently in the way just discussed. The thought here is that these cases should be treated differently because we are more tolerant of disagreement in the aesthetic case than we are in the case of everyday matters of empirical fact. And certainly there is something to this thought - for when someone disagrees with us about some aesthetic question we are less inclined to try to convince them of our point of view than we are when someone disagrees with us about some purely empirical question. But in so far as this is a real phenomenon (and I think its extent can easily be overstated), like the differences already discussed, it is easily characterized in terms of an *epistemic* difference between these areas of discourse rather than a *semantic* one. After all, our willingness to drop some aesthetic issue in the face of disagreement is often motivated, not by the sense that the other person's view is correct, but simply by the recognition that we have no rational means of convincing them of our point of view. This point ties in naturally with the comments I have already made about these matters. For one of the main reasons why we often have no rational mechanism for shifting someone's aesthetic views is that these views will be based (as they should) on that person's aesthetic experience of the world. And where this experience differs from ours, although we may continue to believe that the person's views are mistaken, we may also recognize that these views are completely rational given this person's experience of things. In this case, it will make perfect sense for us to cease arguing about or discussing the issue in question - for we will be in a position to know that any further discussion of this sort is pointless.

Thus, in so far as we are more tolerant of disagreement in the aesthetic case than we are in other cases, this is relatively easy to explain on epistemic grounds. In the aesthetic case we often know that we have no rational means to change someone else's views about some aesthetic question *and* we often don't care all that much that they have views we take to be wrong. Taken together, these two facts about aesthetics will make us quite tolerant of disagreement in this case, whether or not we view aesthetics in realist terms.

But what of our alleged failure to take the testimony of others seriously in forming our views about matters of taste? **This issue is relevant here, because it might be thought that a failure to take aesthetic testimony seriously is indicative of a deeper *non-epistemic* difference between the aesthetic case and the case of empirical facts to which we are comparing it.**

In considering this issue, there are several questions that deserve to be asked. First, to what degree are we truly unresponsive to the testimony of others in forming beliefs about these matters? Second, to what degree should we be unresponsive? And finally, what degree of responsiveness would be required of us by a commitment to realism about these issues?

On the first of these, despite what is sometimes claimed, we are often responsive to the testimony of others in forming views about aesthetics. The very existence of recognized experts about aesthetics makes this very clear, as does the existence of programs designed to educate our aesthetic sensibilities and sense of taste. Both of these phenomena present us with cases in which we seem to defer, often to a great degree, to the testimony of others in forming our aesthetic beliefs.

Of course, it is possible to give other accounts of what we are doing when we defer to views of experts in forming aesthetic beliefs. But the same phenomena are also apparent when we move from considering our reactions to experts in matters of taste to considering our reactions to disagreements with our peers about these issues. For here too, while we are far less deferential than in the case of recognized experts, disagreement with a peer whose aesthetic views we take seriously will often cause us to reconsider our own aesthetic views, often quite dramatically. And so, at least *prima facie*, it seems that we are in general quite responsive to the testimony of others in forming our aesthetic views.

Against this point it might be insisted that such “testimony” functions in the aesthetic case very differently than it does in the case of empirical matters of fact. For, one might insist, disagreements about aesthetic matters only cause us to change our aesthetic views when the point of view of the other party finds a foothold in our own aesthetic sensibility and experience. But this, it seems to me, underestimates the role that aesthetic testimony plays for many people. After all, it is perfectly common for someone to decide that, say, they have “no sense of humor” or “no eye for art” on testimonial grounds. In cases such as this, aesthetic testimony has a dramatic effect on someone’s aesthetic views, even though it finds no resonance in their own aesthetic experience of things.

Moreover, the manner in which aesthetic testimony and experience *do* interact does not seem to me to mark out a dramatic disanalogy with the role that testimony plays in empirical disputes. For even in the empirical case, when our immediate perceptual experience of things conflicts with the testimony of another party, it is relatively rare for this testimony to trump our first-person experience in determining what we believe. So in both these cases, when experience and testimony conflict, we have a tendency to favor our

own first-person experience of things.

In these ways, it is simply false that we are generally unresponsive to the testimony of others in forming aesthetic beliefs. Rather, the situation is the following: We are responsive to the testimony of others about these issues, especially (but not only) when they have the status of recognized experts. But, at the same time, we tend to privilege our own aesthetic sensibility (over the sensibility of others) in forming our aesthetic beliefs. So there are limits to how responsive to such testimony we are.

What remains to be seen is whether the degree of responsiveness we do display to testimony about these issues is incompatible with a realist perspective on them. So, given realism about some question of taste, just how responsive to the testimony of others should we be? And, in particular, is realism about these questions compatible with the way we tend to privilege our own aesthetic sensibility in forming such beliefs?

Unfortunately, answering these questions is no easy task - for it requires us to take a stand on one of the most disputed issues in contemporary epistemology: the epistemology of disagreement. Thus, I simply want to note here that there are a number of views in the epistemological literature that support the conclusion that even in areas where realism applies, we are entitled to give our faculties and experiences more weight in forming our beliefs than we give to the experiences and faculties of others. For example, many philosophers believe that some degree of this sort of bias in favor of our own faculties and experiences is required if we are going to resist a quite generalized form of skepticism.²⁰ And, alternatively if one adopts the “Right Reasons” view of the epistemology of disagreement defended at times by Tom Kelley, one will accept that this sort of stance is justified, at least for those lucky enough to have the right aesthetic responses.²¹ Finally, many externalist views about justification deliver this result as well, at least in some cases.²²

Any of these views has it that realism about some domain is compatible with a tendency to privilege one’s own faculties and experiences in forming beliefs concerning this domain. So if any of these views are correct, realism about matters of taste is fully compatible with the (moderate) sort of bias in favor of our own aesthetic sensibilities that we seem as a

²⁰For a defense of this view, see my XXX. See also Peter van Inwagen “It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything up Insufficient Evidence”, in J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (eds.) *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of Religion Today* (London: Rowman and Littlefield (1997).

²¹See Kellys “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement” in John Hawthorne and Tamar Gendler Szabo (eds.) *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, volume 1 (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 167-196.

²²For a defense of one such view, as applied to the moral case, see Kieran Setiya’s “Does Moral Theory Corrupt Youth?” (*forthcoming*.)

matter of fact to display. Thus, it is far from obvious that there is any conflict between a realist account of these matters and the manner in which we are responsive to the testimony of others in forming aesthetic beliefs.

But perhaps realism about matters of taste should ultimately be rejected for another reason - namely, because it leads to an epistemically unacceptable form of skepticism about these questions? I suspect it is something like this thought that lies behind much of the skepticism one finds about aesthetic realism **and the associated desire to treat the features of aesthetic discourse discussed above in semantic (as opposed to epistemic) terms**. For example, in his “Relativism and Disagreement”, John MacFarlane suggests that realism is an unacceptable option in these sorts of cases because it leads inevitably to skepticism.²³ MacFarlane writes that,

“If there are wholly objective properties of funniness, deliciousness, or likelihood, then most of us must be defective in our capacity to detect them. We must be humorblind, or taste-blind, or likelihood-blind, in much the same way that some of us are color-blind. But this diagnosis clashes with the way we think and talk about these domains. In our judgements about what is delicious, we lack the humility color-blind people show in their judgements about what is red or green. We do not seem to regard the fact that many others disagree with us as grounds for caution in calling foods delicious. We readily judge things to be funny in light of our own senses of humor, even though if challenged we can offer no grounds for thinking our senses of humor are the right ones.” (17)

These comments raise a series of very general issues about skepticism that deserve more discussion than is possible here. But if we reject skepticism in, say, the perceptual case, we should find little reason for aesthetic skepticism in the considerations MacFarlane notes. For instance, as we have just discussed with respect to the issue of testimony, while the fact that others disagree with us about some issue has *some* epistemic significance, it is plausible that it should not *in general* override our entitlement to trust our basic belief-forming faculties.²⁴

Moreover, MacFarlane greatly overstates the amount of *basic* disagreement about matters of taste that actually exists. Contrary to his comments here, the empirical facts suggest that there is a great deal of cross-cultural agreement among human beings with respect to the basic sorts of things we are disposed to experience as beautiful or funny.²⁵

²³In *Philosophical Studies* (2007) 132, 17-31.

²⁴For a defense of this claim, see my XXX.

²⁵See, for example, R. Thornhill, “Darwinian Aesthetics Informs Traditional Aesthetics”. p. 9-38 in

Of course, our considered judgments about beauty or humor are the products of our particular cultural background in a number of ways. But there is actually a substantial core of agreement about these matters across cultures that philosophical discussions of these issues often overlook. Here, the case of humor or beauty is actually quite similar to the case of morality, where, behind our cross-cultural differences, there exists a set of basic moral responses to the world that do not vary from culture to culture.

Finally, MacFarlane also suggests that it is problematic for the realist that, “We readily judge things to be funny in light of our own senses of humor, even though if challenged we can offer no grounds for thinking our senses of humor are the “right” ones.” But the same is plausibly true of our reliance on *all* our basic belief-forming methods. If we are challenged, most of us (myself included) can give no non-question-begging grounds for thinking that our perceptual faculties are delivering the right results. But, unless we are tempted by perceptual skepticism, we will not take it that this gives us a reason for ceasing to rely on our perceptual faculties. Thus, the considerations MacFarlane notes can hardly be taken to support skepticism about matters of taste, unless they are also taken to support skepticism nearly all of our basic belief-forming beliefs as well!

Thus, at the very least, it seems to me that a great deal more would need to be done to show that realism about matters of taste is epistemically unacceptable. After all, all of the epistemic problems we have just discussed are shared by both the aesthetic case and other cases in which realism is much more philosophically acceptable today. Thus, these sorts of epistemological concerns do not seem to provide us with any reason to find realism about aesthetics particularly unattractive in the manner most philosophers appear to.

If this right, then aesthetic realism is, at least, no more implausible on epistemological grounds than, say, moral realism. So why is realism about aesthetics generally considered so much less plausible than moral realism is? Perhaps the reason is simply that it seems to most of us that there *must be* objective standards governing how we treat other people, while it seems much less imperative that there be objective standards governing which things are beautiful or funny or delicious. And, of course, aesthetic realism can only be sustained in some domain in so far as we can argue that such standards do exist.

I think that in these cases there are *some* plausible objective standards of this sort,

Evolutionary Aesthetics, K. Grammer and E. Volland, eds. Berlin: Springer-Verlag (2003). Or see Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*. New York: Doubleday (1999).

although I won't try to enumerate them here. But it is uncontroversial that these standards only go so far. So there are limits to the degree to which it is plausible to claim that claims about deliciousness are determinately true, given a realist construal of these claims. After all, where these objective standards come to an end, a realist construal of claims about deliciousness will be incompatible with their (determinate) truth. So in these cases, a realist will be forced to say that talk about deliciousness, taken literally, is strictly speaking out of place.

This, depending on our understanding of how far the objective standards governing deliciousness extend, may force us to revise our use of these terms to some degree. For it may well be that, upon reflection, we come to the conclusion that we often use terms like "delicious" even when the objective standards governing deliciousness do not license such use, under a realist construal of it.

Thus, realism about these areas of discourse may force us to restrict the literal use of terms like "delicious" to some degree. But this does not seem to me either a surprising or an unappetizing result. For surely, as discussed above, we often say of something that it was delicious when we really intend to convey only that we liked it. And surely the natural thing to say about such cases is that strictly speaking, what we literally said was false, even though the information we communicated in saying what we did was in no way misleading.

In any case, my goal here is not to defend realism about aesthetics in detail, nor to argue that there are *no* good reasons for rejecting such a position. Rather, I hope to have simply pointed out that certain *prima facie* plausible reasons for rejecting it are in fact no reason at all to do so. In particular, I hope to have shown that the phenomenon of faultless disagreement does not give us any reason to reject a realist account of their semantics. And the epistemological considerations that are often cited in defense of the untenability of aesthetic realism are, at best, unconvincing. Thus, if we reject realism about these domains of discourse, it will have to be on grounds other than the fact that they involve faultless disagreements or the fact that a plausible epistemology for them requires us to reject aesthetic realism.