

## Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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### Handout 13: Religious Disagreements, part I

#### *Intolerance*

``[D]ismissing without argument the views of those with whom you disagree''

Feldman's example of intolerance: Cal Thomas column.

But suppose you find out that someone's a neo-Nazi. Are you really obliged to present him with an argument before dismissing his views?

Two possibilities:

1. Maybe in order to dismiss someone's views you have to *have* an argument against them, even if you don't have to *present* the argument. Problem: do you *have* arguments against neo-Nazis?
2. Maybe it's okay to dismiss *some* views without argument (neo-Nazis, e.g.). Problem: where do we draw the line?

#### *Relativism*

Denying that ``there must be just one right answer to a question,`` ``say[ing] that while one proposition is `true for' one person or one group of people, different and incompatible propositions are `true for' others.``

Feldman's example of relativism: that ``somehow it can be that when you say that there is a God, you are right, and when I say that there is not, I am right as well.``

Feldman: (a) this "cannot be right" and (b) it implies there is no disagreement.

#### *Genuine disagreements*

There is a ``proposition that some [...] affirm and some [...] deny.`` But it's not just affirming and denying that Feldman is interested in, it's *believing* and *disbelieving*.

Four cases where apparent disagreement may not be genuine (199):

1. Beliefs sound incompatible but aren't, because we are talking past each other (I say John's at the bank, thinking of the riverbank, you say he's not at the bank, thinking of the financial institution)
2. "Beliefs" are just conflicting evaluations rooted in compatible judgments (I am against pornography b/c it has harmful consequences, you are for it b/c you of the first amendment)
3. "Beliefs" are just endorsements of different practices (e.g., I observe Christmas, you observe Ramadan; I practice Zen meditation, you say the Rosary; we bury our dead, you cremate them; etc.)
4. "Beliefs" are just expressions of divergent non-factual attitudes. (e.g., I experience and express a sense of awe and wonder at the universe, you find the universe boring and pointless.)

Feldman: "one could try to reinterpret professions and denials of religious faith not as statements of beliefs about how things are but as expressions of commitment to different ways of life or as mere expressions of spiritual attitudes. But any such effort is an evasion. It is obvious that theists and atheists do not merely differ in how they live their lives. They really do disagree about the truth of the proposition that God exists" (199-200). The rest of the paper presupposes that religious disagreements are genuine disagreements. This presupposition can be challenged:

1. We can deny those who believe that God exists thereby have a factual belief about which genuine disagreement is possible. Maybe it's more like belief that broccoli is yummy. Or consider the beliefs here: <http://goo.gl/M8T4RJ>. Are they factual beliefs about which genuine disagreement is possible?
2. We can distinguish between having religious commitments or engaging in religious practices that involve presupposing that God exists, and having a factual belief that God exists. E.g., consider prayer. Praying is an activity that presupposes that God exists. But you can pray without having a factual belief that God exists and hears your prayers. Or consider someone who is committed to treating all people as children of God. You could have that commitment without having a factual belief that God exists. If religious "believers" have commitments that presuppose God's existence but don't have factual beliefs that God exists, then they may not have a genuine disagreement with atheists. If I take on commitments that presuppose P (but don't believe P), and you take on commitments that presuppose that P is false (but you don't believe that P is false), do we have a genuine disagreement about P?
3. We can ask whether the atheists and theists are talking past one another. If the fact you're affirming by saying "God exists" is not the same as the fact I'm denying when I say "God does not exist" then we may not have a genuine disagreement. To be sure we're not talking past each other, we have to be sure what each thinks it means to say that God exists. That may be easier said than done.

But suppose we've ruled out these challenges. You have a factual belief that God exists, and I have a factual belief that God does not exist. We have a genuine disagreement. How should we respond? Here is Feldman's basic answer:

If you and I are "epistemic peers" in the matter of whether God exists, and we've shared our evidence with each other, then it's not epistemically okay for you and I to have contrary beliefs about the matter. "Reasonable disagreements" about matters of fact are not possible.

Next time we'll discuss Feldman's argument for this conclusion, and (some of) Catherine Elgin's response.