

Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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Handout 14: Religious Disagreements, part II

Teresa believes that God exists. Alicia believes that God does not exist. Teresa and Alicia have a *genuine disagreement*.

Reasonable disagreement. Two people have a reasonable disagreement when they have a genuine disagreement, and each person is reasonable in her belief. (By "reasonable" Feldman means "has adequate evidential support" (203). So it doesn't mean just that the people can be, in some broad sense, reasonable in believing, or that their beliefs are practically or prudentially reasonable, or whether their beliefs are somehow beneficial (203).)

Epistemic peers. Two people are epistemic peers when they are roughly equal with respect to intelligence, reasoning powers, background information, and so on.

Shared evidence. Two people have shared their evidence about a topic when they have had a full discussion of the topic and have not withheld any relevant information.

Feldman's position is, essentially, that if Alicia and Teresa are epistemic peers who have shared their evidence, then their disagreement is not reasonable. More generally, he thinks, epistemic peers who have shared their evidence about P can't reasonably disagree about P.

Cases that Feldman says support this judgment:

Early and Late. Both watch the news and hear the forecast for rain. But Late stays up and hears a revised forecast, which predicts sunshine. Once Late shares this information with Early, Early can't reasonably disagree about whether there will be rain (201).

The Uniqueness Thesis

(UT) For any body of evidence E and proposition P, E justifies exactly one attitude towards P: belief, disbelief, or suspended judgment.

Given UT, if two people have exactly the same evidence, they can't reasonably disagree.

But what if, while they have the same evidence, they have different "fundamental claims about the world or epistemological principles about how to deal with evidence"?

Feldman's response to this question is basically: once we start talking about these differences, we can either give reasons for favoring one over the other. ``And this idea can support the tolerant attitude [...] only if people can think that their own starting point is reasonable and that different and incompatible starting points are reasonable as well. I cannot understand how that could be true" (206).

Can Evidence Be Shared?

If people don't have the same evidence, they either aren't epistemic peers or haven't shared their evidence. Perhaps Alicia and Teresa just *can't* share all their evidence relevant to the topic of God's existence. Consider the following bits of evidence:

- T It seems obvious to me, given my evidence, that God exists.
- A It seems obvious to me, given my evidence, that God doesn't exist.

Suppose that Teresa has T but not A, and Alicia has A but not T. Then they don't, after all, have the same evidence. And this isn't the sort of evidence you can share (though you can come to learn that someone else has it).

Feldman's response: "Suppose you and I are standing by the window looking out on the quad. We think we have comparable vision and we know each other to be honest. I seem to see what looks to me like the dean standing out in the middle of the quad. [...] I believe that the dean is standing on the quad. Meanwhile, you seem to see nothing of the kind there. You think that no one, and thus not the dean, is standing in the middle of the quad. We disagree. Prior to our saying anything, each of us believes reasonable. Then I say something about the dean's being on the quad, and we find out about our situation. In my view, once that happens, each of us should suspend judgment" (207-208).

Is Feldman right? Suppose you seem to see the dean and your friend doesn't. You find this out, and you both take some time to look again. Things still look the same to each of you. Should you:

1. Drop your belief that the dean is there, add a belief that he's not, and conclude that something must be wrong with your vision?
2. Do what Feldman says?
3. Retain your belief that the dean is there, and conclude that something must be wrong with your friend's vision?