**An Absolutist Theory of Faultless Disagreement in Aesthetics**

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*Abstract:* Some philosophers writing on the possibility of faultless disagreement have argued that the only way to account for the intuition that there could be disagreements which are faultless in every sense is to accept a relativistic semantics. In this paper we demonstrate that this view is mistaken by constructing an absolutist semantics for a particular domain – aesthetic discourse – which allows for the possibility of genuinely faultless disagreements. We argue that this position (Humean absolutism) is an improvement over previous absolutist responses to the relativist’s challenge and that it presents an independently plausible account of the semantics of aesthetic discourse.

In recent years philosophers have paid a great deal of attention to the putative phenomenon of faultless disagreement. Some have argued that there are certain domains in which there are (or at least could be) instances of genuine disagreement in which neither party is (in some important sense we will explicate later) at fault.[[1]](#endnote-1) Popular candidate domains include disagreements concerning ethics and aesthetics, those involving epistemic modals (e.g. ‘he might be in the car’), and, perhaps most prominently debates surrounding so called ‘predicates of personal taste’ such as ‘fun’ and ‘tasty’. Such claims are, of course, controversial and some have expressed scepticism as to whether there could ever be disagreements which are faultless in any theoretically interesting sense.[[2]](#endnote-2) Others, though, have not only accepted these appearances at face value but have put them to work in the service of various theoretical goals, invoking the phenomenon of faultless disagreement as, among other things, a mandate for endorsing relativistic semantic theories.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In this paper we will have very little to say concerning the general debate over whether faultless disagreement – in the sense we will explicate below – is, or even could be, a genuine phenomenon. (Though we hope that the view we sketch will address some reservations which might arise regarding the phenomenon). Rather we will focus on the claimed link between faultless disagreement and relativism. Arguing that, appearances to the contrary, an attractive non-relativist theory can be sketched which captures both the intuition that the disputes in question are genuine disagreements and the intuition that they are completely faultless.[[4]](#endnote-4) Further, we will not attempt to establish that the view we will outline below provides the correct account of the semantics of the relevant disputes but merely argue that it manages to present an independently plausible non-relativist account of the semantics while also capturing the alleged phenomenon of faultless disagreement. Since the view of faultless disagreement we sketch below takes its inspiration from some of Hume’s work in aesthetics our discussion will primarily focus on disputes concerning matters of aesthetic taste but the lessons we will draw are intended to be equally applicable to disputes in other domains where faultless disagreement may be present.

In §1 we offer a brief overview of the current dialectic concerning faultless disagreement, before moving on to consider an argument for the claim that an acceptance of faultless disagreement in a particular domain mandates accepting a relativist (rather than contextualist or absolutist) semantics for that domain. §2 probes a little more deeply into the notions of faultlessness and disagreement involved in such arguments. In §3 we begin to explore a Humean account of aesthetic discourse and semantics before explaining in §4 how this Humean account underwrites the possibility of an absolutist account of faultless disagreement in aesthetics (and elsewhere). In §5 we briefly address a few potential worries concerning our account before turning, in §6, to address what we take to be the most significant objection to our Humean absolutist view. We argue that the objection in question, concerning the doxastic role of truth-value gaps, can be defeated by marshalling resources from recent discussions of the normative role of indeterminacy.

*1. Faultless Aesthetic Disagreement and the Argument for Relativism*

What might a case of faultless aesthetic disagreement look like? As an exemplar, consider the following putative example (**D1**).

*Mary*: Beethoven’s 5th Symphony is a better work of music than Mozart’s 25th Symphony.

*Jane*: No, it’s not the case that Beethoven’s 5th Symphony is a better work of music than Mozart’s 25th Symphony.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Those who posit genuinely faultless disagreement in aesthetics claim that under the right conditions – Mary and Jane sincerely assert their judgements, they have both devoted sufficient time and effort to appraising the works in question, neither is suffering from any relevant epistemic defect, and so forth[[6]](#endnote-6) – cases like D1 can exhibit a feature which is absent in ‘ordinary’ disagreements. Specifically they claim that the disagreement might be *faultless*, in that the two subjects could – in some sense – both be correct in their judgement. Thus Kölbel (2003:54) claims that ‘[I]t may well be that [Mary and Jane] each have exactly the view they ought to have on the question […] and that for both of them changing their belief would constitute a mistake’. Some have taken this intuition to have a variety of radical consequences. Most relevantly for our purposes relativists, such as Kölbel, have argued that endorsing the possibility of faultlessness in aesthetic disagreements such as **D1** – or in parallel disputes concerning predicates of personal taste, epistemic modals and so forth – requires us to adopt a revisionary semantics for aesthetic judgements according to which the contents of aesthetic judgements receive truth-values only relative to a judge.[[7]](#endnote-7) Our primary aim in this paper will be to resist such inferences from faultless disagreement to relativism but before we do so it is important to understand more about the nature of the dialectic between relativism and its rivals.

In addition to aesthetic relativism, two further positions concerning the semantics of aesthetic judgement will be of interest to us here: *contextualism* and *absolutism*. [[8]](#endnote-8) We can define these three positions in terms of their attitudes towards claims of the following kinds:

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-values of aesthetic judgements may vary between contexts.

The versions of Content-Variance and Truth-Relativity presented here are, of course, a little underdevloped and any fully developed account of the semantics of aestheitic judgement would need to do more to explicate both of these conditions. It would, for example, need to specify that the relevant differences between contexts can be traced to a distinctively aesthetic factor (such as differences between the individuals’ aesthetic standards).[[9]](#endnote-9) Otherwise someone would qualify as endorsing Content-Variance merely on the basis of accepting the relativiely uncontroversial claim that ‘Bon Jovi’s latest albulm is excellent’ expresses different propositions when uttered in 1987 and 2007. These loose chariterisations will, however, suffice for our purposes.

Contextualists endorses both Content-Variance and Truth-Relativity.[[10]](#endnote-10) On one simple form of this view, aesthetic judgements carry a hidden indexical parameter which is supplied by the speaker’s perspective or standard of taste or similar (for ease of exposition we will use ‘standard of taste’ in what follows) —such that in **D1** Mary expresses the proposition *Beethoven’s 5th Symphony is a better work of music than Mozart’s 25th Symphony according to Mary’s standard of taste*, and Jane expresses the proposition *it is not the case that* *Beethoven’s 5th Symphony is a better work of music than Mozart’s 25th Symphony according to Jane’s standard of taste*. Since content varies between contexts of use, it appears to follow that the truth-value may vary in tandem—so contextualists also endorse Truth-Relativity. [[11]](#endnote-11)

Contextualists seem to have a straightforward explanation of how cases such as **D1** could come to exhibit faultlessness. Insofar as the propositions expressed by Mary and Jane 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 the Beethoven piece is better according to Mary’s standard whilst it is not better according to Jane’s. 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 possiblity of *disagreement* in such cases. If Mary’s judgment refers only to Mary’s standard and Jane’s judgment refers only to Jane’s standard, then it is not clear that the judgements are in any kind of conflict.[[12]](#endnote-12) At the very least it appears, given the contextualists acceptance of Truth-Relativity, that there is no inconsistency in claiming that the Beethoven is better according to Mary’s standard and that it is not better according to Jane’s. In the absence of apparent conflict, the objection goes, it is difficult to see why, by the contextualist’s lights, we should think that Mary and Jane are really disagreeing in **D1**.[[13]](#endnote-13) Of course this argument is not without its detractors. Sundell (2011), for example, has recently argued that, appearances notwithstanding, the contextualist is able to offer a satisfactory account of exchanges such as **D1** according to which Mary and Jane do genuinely disagree. However, since our focus in this paper will be the dialectic between the relativist and the absolutist such complications need not detain us here.

Absolutists, on the other hand, deny both Content-Variance and Truth-Relativity. Absolutists hold that aesthetic judgements do not vary in either content or truth-value between contexts—if a judgement is true in the mouth of one subject, it must also be true in the mouth of any other arbitrarily chosen subject.,[[14]](#endnote-14) Unsurprisingly, absolutists seem well-placed to make sense of the presence of disagreement in cases like **D1**. Given the absolutist’s denial of Truth-Relativity the two judgments expressed appear straightforwardly inconsistent, and this inconsistency enables the absolutist to easily explain the presence of disagreement. However, this explanation appears to undermine the notion that **D1** could really be faultless. If Mary and Jane’s judgments are inconsistent, then surely there must be some important sense in which at least one of them has failed to have ‘exactly the view they ought to have’. As such, it appears to follow that at least one subject must be at fault—even if that fault is very difficult (perhaps even impossible) to detect. Absolutists can endorse the presence of disagreement in cases like **D1** but not, it seems, the presence of faultlessness.

A number of relativists have recently argued that their view is able to combine the limited successes of contextualism and absolutism whilst avoiding their respective pitfalls.[[15]](#endnote-15) Simply put, 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’s 5th Symphony is a better work of music than Mozart’s 25th Symphony’. 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 and false as evaluated from a different perspective. For example in case **D1**, the proposition expressed by Mary could be true as evaluated from her standard of taste but false as evaluated from Jane’s standard (and vice versa for the proposition expressed by Jane).[[16]](#endnote-16)

Relativists take the denial of Content-Variance to entitle them to endorse the presence of disagreement in **D1**. Since the proposition expressed by Jane is the negation of that expressed by Mary, they claim, the two subjects disagree. Additionally, relativists take their acceptance of Truth-Relativity to allow them to endorse the appearance of faultlessness. If both Mary and Jane 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 possesses at least 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. And, given the alleged failures of contextualism and absolutism, the availability of this positive account of faultless disagreement is taken to weigh in favour of aesthetic relativism. But do our intuitons about **D1** really support the view that there is faultless disagreement of the kind the relativist proposes? To answer this we need to dig a little deeper into the notions of faultlessness and disagreement that are in play.

*2. The Nature of Faultless Disagreement*

As already discussed above, disputes such as **D1** strike many as disagreements where it is – in some sense – possible for neither party to be at fault. Yet this intuition admits of a number of readings. On the relativist’s intended reading, this is a claim that both beliefs may have achieved their ultimate goal -- that both subjects may have satisfied the *success norms* or *teleological norms* of belief formation (in Wright’s (2008b) sense).[[17]](#endnote-17) But achieving this seems, at the very least, to require that both beliefs be true (of course it may require more than this e.g. that the beliefs in question constitute knowledge but we will not enter into such debates here); something which, on a standard semantics, would quickly lead us to a contradiction in cases such as **D1**. In order to avoid this, relativists hold, we must relativise truth to the perspectives of individuals.[[18]](#endnote-18) The upshot is that, for the relativist, Mary’s belief is (or at least could be) true according to her standard of taste, while Jane’s belief is true according to hers. The fact that each subject believes truly according to her aesthetic standard grounds the judgement of faultlessness. Unsurprisingly, this interpretation of the faultlessness claim has its detractors. One natural response is to argue that the strong notion of faultlessness presupposed by Kölbel and his relativist cohorts is not necessary. Schafer (2011), for example, has argued that a weaker *epistemic* notion can do similar work. It is, after all, not clear that endorsing the claim in Kölbel’s quote above that both parties ‘have exactly the view they ought to have’ requires that we find some way to hold that both Mary and Jane have *true* beliefs. As such, some have thought that the right way to understand cases of faultless disagreement is as cases in which both subjects have satisfied what we might term the correct *process norms* for aesthetic belief formation. That is to say that in **D1**, and parallel cases, both subjects have exhausted their epistemic responsibilities towards their respective beliefs and assertions; both have formed their belief according to the right method, appraised the relevant evidence to a sufficient degree and so forth. The thought being that satisfying such process norms is sufficient to underwrite the intuition that Mary and Jane ‘have exactly the belief they ought to have’, and that ‘for either of them to change their belief would be a mistake’. An epistemic approach to faultlessness of this kind is, however, (as Schafer 2011 demonstrates) straightforwardly consistent with a semantics according to which at most one of Jane and Mary can speak truly.

While Schafer and others have found these weaker faultlessness requirements appealing, Michele Palmira (forthcoming: 11-2) has argued – persuasively in our view – that they do not fully capture the common intuition that disagreements like this can be faultless *in every sense*. And, further we worry – given that disagreements which are merely epistemically faultless are possible in virtually any domain – that such accounts do not respect the intuitive thought that there is a kind of faultless disagreement which is possible with respect to disputes in aesthetics (and those concerning predicates of personal taste, epistemic modals and so forth) but which never arises in disputes concerning e.g. scientific theories, the shapes of medium sized objects in our immediate vicinity, or the events of the war of 1812. We will not, however, endeavour to adjudicate such debates in the present paper. Our interest here is not in asking whether absolutism is compatible with faultless disagreement in Schafer’s sense – clearly it is – but rather in demonstrating that a plausible absolutist theory can be constructed which captures the stronger notion of faultlessness – along with its appeal to success norms – typically embraced by relativists and contextualists. If successful, then, our view will not only demonstrate (as Schafer already has) that absolutism is compatible with an epistemic view of faultlessness but will also show that it is compatible with the more demanding accounts of faultlessness which the absolutist’s opponents typically employ to motivate their own views at the expense of absolutism.

Having isolated the species of faultlessness relevant to our argument we turn now to consider what notion of disagreement is in play. There have in recent years been a number of competing attempts to define what precisely it is for two subjects to disagree.[[19]](#endnote-19) Fortunately, since our paper is primarily concerned with the dialectic between the relativist and the absolutist, we need not enter into the details of such debates here. Instead we will focus below exclusively on cases of disagreement where one party asserts some content *p* and the other party asserts its negation. There are reasons to doubt whether this is necessary for disagreement, indeed we believe it almost certainly isn’t, but fortunately nothing we say below requires this claim. Is it sufficient though? Some – for example Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009) – have recently attempted to cast doubt on the relativist’s ability to capture disagreement merely by permitting situations in which one party asserts some content and the other its negation. Again, though, these debates need not concern us here. Our central claim is that the absolutist can give a plausible account of faultless disagreement, if it turns out that the relativist cannot then so much the better for our Humean absolutist view. The kind of cases we are considering are certainly sufficient for disagreement given an absolutist semantics, and that will be our focus below. [[20]](#endnote-20)

*3. Developing Humean Absolutism*

Our absolutist theory, Humean Absolutism, begins with two theses commonly attributed to Hume in his ‘Of the Standard of Taste’. The view is not, however, an exercise in Hume exegesis; we do not claim that Hume genuinely accepted either of these two claims and, still less, that he would endorse anything like our Humean Absolutist view. Rather, the view is ‘Humean’ in that it takes inspiration from Hume’s innovations.

The first central principle of our view is the claim that the correctness of an aesthetic judgment is determined by the joint verdict of ‘true judges’ or ‘ideal critics’. The *locus classicus* for this view is, of course, Hume’s (1757/1875 sect. 23) account of a true judge as one who possesses ‘strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice’ and his claim that ‘the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty’. 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 the following principle:

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

**HA1** is, of course, somewhat lacking in detail. It is, for example, not stated exactly which features an ideal critic must possess (or, indeed whether they will need to possess different features depending on the different artforms judges), or whether the ideal critics in question are intended to be real individuals of merely abstractions of some kind.[[21]](#endnote-21) Different Humean absolutist theories will, doubtless, provide different answers to these questions but our focus here is on the overall shape of the theory rather than on its particular instances.

In addition to **HA1**, Humean Absolutism also endorses a second Humean principle; the claim that, as a result of insurmountable difference in human natures, even ideal critics will sometimes diverge in their judgements. As Hume (1757/1875, sect. 28) put things:

[T]here still remain two sources of variation […] 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.

For our purposes, this amounts to the claim

**HA2:** There are some aesthetic cases where some ideal critics will judge that *p* and others will judge that not-*p*.

So according to **HA1** aesthetic truth is determined by the convergence of ideal critics and according to **HA2** ideal critics can sometimes disagree in the sense we outlined above. These claims would, of course, be extremely controversial if taken as attempts at Hume exegesis. James Shelley (2013), for example, has argued persuasively for the claim that the divergences between true judges which Hume highlights were not intended to be disagreements in our sense since they do not involve any conflict in judgement as to whether – to use Hume’s own example – Ovid’s works are superior to those of Tacitus. Rather, on Shelley’s interpretation (ibid. 146) they ‘agree in the only judgment they make, which is that Ovid and Tacitus are both good’ and though they differ in their personal preferences ‘neither judges the author he prefers to be better, since each recognizes that he has no basis for doing so.’ Just as, as Shelley points out, I can prefer the company of one friend to another without thereby making any judgements concerning their relative merits as people (or even as friends). To reiterate, though, it is no part of our position that either of our two Humean theses were actually endorsed by the historical Hume so there is no need for us to rely on any controversial exegetical claims.

The core of our Humean Absolutist view, then, it that aesthetic truth is determined by the convergence of ideal critics and that ideal critics can disagree over certain questions of aesthetic value. There are, however, a number of ways for these two assumptions to be accommodated into an aesthetic theory. The version we develop here involves postulating *paracompleteness* in aesthetic truth. As such, we will need to provide an account of aesthetic falsehood

**HA3:** An aesthetic proposition *p* is false iff ideal critics converge in judging that not-*p*.

In conjunction with our first two Humean theses **HA3** entails the possibility of certain aesthetic cases where neither *p* nor not-*p* is true. Of course, **HA1** and **HA3** are not the only way to interpret the Humean assumptions described above in truth-conditional terms. Both principles admit of variants, and one might instead wish to develop a paraconsistent account whereby the endorsement of *any* ideal critic is sufficient for a judgement’s truth (and thus cases of divergence give rise to dialetheia). While we have nothing substantive to say against such alternative explanations, philosophical orthodoxy has typically been more resistant to truth-value *gluts* than to truth-value *gaps*. Further, if we were to accept a paraconsistent account then this would raise further questions about whether cases such as **D1** still represent genuine disagreement.[[22]](#endnote-22) That said if a plausible absolutist theory incorporating dialetheia can be developed this will merely be more grist to our mill.

Having presented some key tenets of our Humean Absolutist view we will move on in the next section to discuss how such a view has the resources to account for faultless disagreement. Before doing so, though, we will briefly offer one further clarification. The notion of ‘convergence’ plays a significant role in our theory and it is important to note that, at least as we will understand the term, it is not a necessary condition for ideal critics to converge on *p* that every ideal critic endorse *p*. Ideal critics need not have a maximal set of aesthetic beliefs (indeed, if they are intended to be actual individuals or some close counterpart of such then it is clear that they won’t have anything like a maximal set of such beliefs). As such, it is consistent with convergence on *p* that some ideal critics have no opinion on *p*. Convergence on *p*, then, requires only that any ideal critic who were to reach a verdict on *p* would endorse it.

*4. Faultless Disagreement for Humean Absolutists*

Our goal is to show that the Humean Absolutist can endorse the following claim regarding 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 whether *p*.

According to **HAF**, aesthetic disagreements can be faultless when they centre on matters over which ideal critics disagree. Of course not all such disagreements will be faultless in every sense, since many will involve at least one disputant failing to observe the correct process norm(s), but such cases at least allow for the *possibility* of faultless disagreements. However there remains a serious obstacle to any such account; as can be seen from the following argument (adapted from Kölbel 2004). Suppose that Dave judges that *p* and Eve judges that not-*p*. Suppose further that ideal critics diverge over *p*--some judge *p* whilst others judge that not-*p*. As such, according to principles **HA1** and **HA3** described above, 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. This line of reasoning rests on the view described in §2 whereby faultlessness requires achieving the success norms of a particular discourse and where these success norms are spelled out in terms of (at a minimum) acquiring true beliefs. In particular, the argument appeals to the following principle:

**T:** It is a mistake to believe a proposition which is not true.

Importantly ‘mistake’ here is to be understood in terms of success norms, as suchaccepting **T** does not entail denying the common thought that one could be rational or justified in believing a falsehood. We aim to defend the idea that faultlessness can be understood in terms of the success norms for aesthetic discourse, but to deny – contrary to what we have assumed above – that these norms prescribe believing only what is true. In particular, we believe the Humean Absolutist should endorse the following claim: that the success norm of aesthetic thought and talk is not truth but rather adherence to the view that would be taken by some ideal critic. As such the Humean Absolutists should replace **T** with:

**HAT:** It is a mistake to believe an aesthetic proposition which no ideal critic would endorse.[[23]](#endnote-23)

This transition is natural in the light of Humean Absolutism. Insofar as one holds that ideal critics are central to the determination of aesthetic value, it seems plausible that a central goal of engaging in aesthetic discourse should be to become like an ideal critic in key respects (or even, depending on one’s view, to *become* an ideal critic). But if this is so, we need only aim to become like *one* ideal critic, rather than (*per impossibile*) like the *convergence* of ideal critics. After all, according to Humean Absolutism, we do not even hold ideal critics to this latter standard (since one can be an ideal critic whilst also disagreeing with other ideal critics). As such, we have achieved the success norm of aesthetic discourse -- and are in this sense not making a mistake -- when we believe an aesthetic proposition which accords with the judgements 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 judgement of some ideal critic are belief-worthy. As such, the addition of **HAT** is well-motivated. Further, **HAT** does not permit any case where we are licensed to believe falsely that *p* but only (as we will discuss further in §6 below) certain cases where we are entitled to believe *p* when *p* is neither determinately true nor determinately false.

In the light of this, consider again our simple case of aesthetic disagreement **D1**. It seems plausible to us that at least one ideal critic would judge in accordance with Mary and at least one would judge in accordance with Jane. (If you do not agree, consider a different case: all that is required here is that we accept that there *could* be cases ofaesthetic disagreement where an ideal critic could take either side.[[24]](#endnote-24)) If this is right, then either view is consistent with being an ideal critic. As such, Humean Absolutism can--with **HAT** in hand--endorse the possibility of faultlessness in **D1** (or in some relevantly similar case). If ideal critics diverge in this way then, according to **HA1**, neither of the contents expressed in **D1** is true. Nevertheless, both Mary and Jane accord with the judgement of some ideal critic, and as such they both meet the success norm of aesthetic discourse.

This picture also provides Humean Absolutism with a straightforward method for ascribing sensible limits to the phenomenon of faultless disagreement. The possibility of faultlessness only arises in cases where ideal critics diverge in their aesthetic judgements. This immediately limits the explanation to the case of aesthetic judgements, and so--unlike epistemic views--there is no danger of proliferating the relevant kind of faultlessness into other areas where the faultless intuition does not arise. What’s more, given some plausible assumptions concerning ideal critics, the possibility of faultlessness can be limited to a particular class of aesthetic disagreements. To pick a crude example: one might not be inclined to think that there could be a faultless disagreement over whether Justin Bieber’s latest album is aesthetically superior to Mozart’s symphonies. And if it turns out (as seems extremely plausible) that ideal critics do not diverge over this matter – presumably because they converge on preferring Mozart’s work to Bieber’s – then Humean Absolutism is in a position to endorse such intuitions.

*5. Some Objections*

Having outlined our Humean Absolutist view, and said a little to motivate it, we will move on to consider some possible objections. Before we do so, though, it is important to stress that – as already mentioned in our introduction – it is not our intention to establish that the Humean account we have presented is correct but merely to show that it can present an independently plausible non-relativist account of the semantics while also capturing the phenomenon of faultless disagreement. So why might someone think it fails to meet even this standard?

There are, of course, a number of general challenges which face any Humean account in aesthetics. For example, 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. We will not, however, attempt to deal with such general criticisms here. Firstly, because we believe that others – for example Levinson (2002) and Shelley (2013) – have already done more than enough to establish the possibility of broadly Humean views which are, at least, plausible. Secondly, because focusing on such general issues would take us too far from the central concerns of this paper; faultless disagreement and the semantics of aesthetic judgements. As such, we will not focus on general objections to a Humean framework in aesthetics but only address worries concerning the specific manner in which we have employed such a framework in accounting for faultless disagreement.

A first objection one might have is that even if adhering to the views of an ideal critic amounts to *a* success norm of aesthetic discourse, fulfilling this norm is consistent with nevertheless committing other kinds of mistakes. After all, we might form an aesthetic belief purely by chance which happens to accord with the view of some ideal critic. Or we might form a belief through some inadmissible method (e.g. testimony, if so called ‘pessimists’ concerning aesthetic testimony are to be believed[[25]](#endnote-25)) and thus appear to have made a key mistake, even though the belief accords with the view of some ideal critic. However, note that one can say the same things about *true* beliefs. We might form a belief on poor epistemic grounds which turns out to be true; again, in this case we are not beyond reproach.[[26]](#endnote-26) The key in both cases--truth and adherence to the views of ideal critics--is that meeting the relevant success norm opens up the possibility of faultlessness. The relevant datum about case **D1** is not that it *must* be understood as a faultless disagreement, but rather that it is *not necessary that there be any fault* in the disagreement. This is exactly what Humean Absolutism accounts for: if both subjects have beliefs which accord with the view of some ideal critic, then it is not necessary that there be any fault in the disagreement. Other kinds of fault are not ruled out, but, crucially, it is possible that the disagreement be faultless.

One further potential objection relates to the ambitions of Humean Absolutism to underwrite the sense in which cases like **D1** are *disagreements*. As is already familiar from the case of indexical contextualism (and, if some of the criticisms we discussed in §2 above are to be believed, various relativist theories), there is no benefit to an account which captures the faultlessness intuition only at the cost of the ability to account for the presence of disagreement.[[27]](#endnote-27) Consider an elaboration of case **D1** in which Mary is a devout Humean Absolutist who knows that both she and Jane have judged in accordance with some ideal critic. This seems to remove a key reason she may have had to criticise Jane’s belief--and we may, as a result, think it implausible to say that she *disagrees* with Jane. In response to this we should recognise that a number of the core features of disagreement are still instantiated here: The proposition which Jane asserts is the negation of the proposition asserted by Mary, Mary and Jane’s beliefs are such that they could not be true together (since ideal critics could not converge on both Mary’s judgement *and* on Jane’s judgement), if Mary’s claim were true then Jane’s must be false (since if ideal critics were to converge on *p* then they would also converge on rejecting not-*p)*, and so forth. It seems unproblematic, then, to claim that anyone who believes as Mary does will meet the requirements for being in a *state* of disagreement (roughly the kind of disagreement that arises whenever two individuals – whether they know it or not – have conflicting attitudes) with someone who believes as Jane does. However, the presence of (reasonable) disagreement as an *activity* (that is the kind of disagreement that requires not only a conflict in attitudes but also an active dispute between two parties) is not so easy to secure.[[28]](#endnote-28) The Humean Absolutist may have to accept that it would, *ceteris paribus*, be irrational to enter into a dispute over whether or not Mozart’s work is better than Beethoven’s and that in a situation like **D1** the rational attitude for Mary and Jane to have towards one another’s beliefs is something like *tolerance* (since each subject’s view accords with that of at least one ideal critic). Accepting this would amount to a concession of sorts and it may follow that – given Humean Absolutism – there can be states of faultless disagreement but no activity of faultless disagreement. Whether this is a significant cost, or indeed a cost at all, for the view is not an easy matter to decide. Fortunately, though, we do not have to address the issue here. Recall that our aim here is primarily to dispute the relativist’s claim that theirs is the only view of the semantics of aesthetic discourse which can properly account for the possibility of genuinely faultless disagreement. And whatever problems the Humean absolutist may have in accounting for the possibility of faultless disagreement as an activity will be shared by their relativist opponent. After all, it is key to the relativist’s position that each party has exactly the belief that they ought to have and that their beliefs are faultless in every sense. If it is possible for individuals who know themselves to be in such a state to engage in faultless disputes then neither we nor the relativist have any case to answer. If it is not then this may be a cost for Humean Absolutism but it is one which is shared by relativism and – as such – cannot be used as a reason to reject the former in favour of the latter.

In this section we have briefly considered a number of possible objections to our Humean Absolutist view and argued that they are not compelling. In the next section we will address what we take to be the most central and fundamental objection to accounts of faultless disagreement – such as the Humean Absolutist view we have proposed – which appeal to truth-value gaps.

*6. The Doxastic Role of Indeterminacy*

Humean Absolutism is an instance of a particular two-fold strategy for explaining faultless disagreement in a particular domain:

1. Develop a semantics which postulates truth-value gaps or indeterminacy in a certain discourse

2. Propose local norms of belief and assertion for that discourse which permit belief and assertion of some propositions which are neither true nor false.

However, all such accounts will face a set of related objections arising from the fact that they permit belief in propositions which are *not true*.

One particularly strong way of putting the objection is as follows. It’s plausible to think that believing a proposition involves taking it to be true. As such, acquiring compelling evidence that a proposition is *not* true should suffice to motivate a rational subject to drop their endorsement of the proposition. In the case of Humean Absolutism, evidence of the divergence of ideal critics over *p* will count as compelling evidence that *p* is not true, and therefore should suffice to motivate a rational subject to drop their endorsement of *p*. This seems hard to square with the Humean Absolutist’s norm (**HAT**), which countenances belief in any proposition which is endorsed by some ideal critic.

There are, we believe, a number of prima facie promising ways in which the Humean Absolutist could respond to this objection but in what follows we will focus on one particular response stemming from some recent wok on the doxastic role of indeterminacy by, amongst others, J.R.G. Williams. For our purposes the key aspect of this response is the denial of the assumption that possessing compelling evidence for a proposition *p*’s not being true (and, in particular, possessing such evidence in virtue of possessing evidence that it is indeterminate whether *p*) suffices to motivate a rational subject to drop their endorsement of that proposition. Williams (2012: 223) defends a view according to which indeterminacy is *normatively silent* -- that ‘so far as general alethic norms go there are simply no constraints on’ what our ‘attitude to *p* should be, when p is indeterminate’ (for our purposes, Williams’ notion of ‘alethic norms’ should be understood as parallel to the ‘success norms’ discussed above). Williams’ claim, then, is that the mere fact that a proposition is indeterminate does not, in itself, entail that any doxastic attitude one might take towards that proposition would violate some success norm. Nevertheless, it does not follow that, in cases of indeterminacy, there is *nothing* to be said which favours one doxastic attitude over another. Rather, Williams suggests, each discourse will be governed by *local norms* which prescribe when belief in an indeterminate proposition will be permitted in that particular discourse. So although there are no general or globalsuccess norms arising from the status of a proposition as indeterminate, there are nevertheless discourse-specific success norms which govern belief and assertion in each discourse.

If this view is correct, then a key claim in the argument against indeterminacy approaches to faultless disagreement – that acquiring compelling evidence that a proposition is not true should suffice to motivate a rational subject to drop their endorsement of that proposition – turns out to be mistaken. On the normative silence view of indeterminacy, merely learning that a proposition is indeterminate (and hence not true) does not, *in itself*, have *any* normative consequences, and thus cannot in itself constitute reason to drop one’s endorsement of the proposition. As such what normative role, if any, such indeterminacy plays with respect to aesthetic judgement will be entirely determined by the local norms governing such judgements. One could, of course, claim that the local norm in aesthetics are such as to prohibit belief in the face of indeterminacy but – in the absence of independent argument for such a claim – such a response would be clearly question begging against the Humean Absolutist.

We have seen, then, that if Williams’ normative silence view is correct then the Humean Absolutist is able to avoid the most pressing objection to their position. Is the view correct though? So far we have merely described, rather than defended, Williams’ position, so why might someone endorse the normative silence view? In order to defend his view Williams (ibid. 220) points to the ‘incredible amount of diversity’ in the literature with respect to accounts of the doxastic significance of indeterminacy.[[29]](#endnote-29) Whereas most writers are – at least broadly speaking – in agreement with respect to the doxastic significance of what seem to be analogous cases (such as the doxastic significance of our knowing that a particular event has a certain chance of occurring). Indeed as Williams (ibid. 221) points out:

It’s hard to think of examples where there is an operator which is agreed to be a *relevant* response to the question it embeds, but where we can’t even agree on the broad outlines of *how* it’s relevant. After all, if it’s to be relevant in virtue of putting a constraint on our attitudes, it better be that there’s a convention of conforming to those constraints, otherwise the whole practice would lose its point. But why, in the case of borderlineness, do we continue to find *radically* different accounts of this relevance at the level of theory? It is most mysterious.

The mystery vanishes, though, once we accept that indeterminacy comes with no built in doxastic constraints. As such – in contrast to the seemingly analogous operators Williams considers – mere conceptual competency with the notion of indeterminacy will not tell you what doxastic attitude you should take with respect to a particular indeterminate proposition. Rather, the surprising variety of philosophical accounts on offer is explained by the equally wide variety of doxastic constraints which might be active with respect to indeterminacy in a particular domain.

These claims are, of course, controversial. Matti Eklund (2013) has recently argued that the features Williams highlights do not necessarily support the view that there is a general cross-domain notion of indeterminacy which is, in itself, normatively silent. Eklund (2013: 268) proposes instead that we take there to be different kinds of indeterminacy at play in different domains and that while Williams is correct that ‘when p is indeterminate, there is no doxastic attitude it is right or wrong to take to p *solely on account of p’s being indeterminate*’ it is still the case that ‘[d]ifferent indeterminate propositions p can […] be such that particular doxastic attitudes are right or wrong to take to them […] on account of what kind of indeterminacy they display.’ Fortunately such disputes need not concern us here. While there are, of course, a number of important differences between these two accounts these are irrelevant for our purposes. Eklund’s account is – as Eklund himself points out (ibid.) – compatible with the broader spirit of Williams’ normative silence model and, more relevantly for our purposes, would still allow that the kind of indeterminacy present in the aesthetic domain is one which does not render it illegitimate to believe *p* whenever *p* is indeterminate.

Given this, we think it is clear that the normative silence view is attractive in a number of respects. That said, we do not intend to argue that the view is actually correct. Firstly because, as already mentioned above, we do not think it is the only prima facie plausible response which a Humean Absolutist could appeal to. They could, for example, reject the claim that indeterminacy (as such) is normatively silent in favour of Wright (2001)’s claim that it is characteristic of indeterminacy to permit judgements of either *p* or *not-p*. Secondly, to reiterate, it is only our intention to defend the plausibility of the Humean account rather than to demonstrate its truth. As such we do not need to show that any particular defence of it is successful but merely that there is no good reason to judge that all such defences fail. And – given the wide variety of extant accounts of the doxastic significance of indeterminacy which Williams highlights – it certainly seems premature to maintain that there is no viable alternative to the claim that indeterminacy mandates withholding belief. It seems, then, that as things stand the ‘doxastic role of indeterminacy’ objection is unsuccessful.

In this paper we have presented an attractive non-relativist account of faultless disagreement in aesthetics – the Humean Absolutist view – and defended it from some immediate objections. Whether Humean Absolutism, and parallel views in other areas where the faultlessness intuition arises, is ultimately worth accepting will depend on the resolution of a number of debates outside the scope of this paper.[[30]](#endnote-30)

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1. For some recent discussions see Baker (2014), Barker (2010), Francén (2010), Kölbel (2004), MacFarlane (2007), Palmira (forthcoming) and Schafer (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Stojanovic (2007), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009), and Schaffer (2011) discuss the viability of such a strategy. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See e.g. Kölbel (2004; 2009) and Lasersohn (2005), [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. We are not, of course, the first to attempt such a task. Schafer (2011) has famously argued for the possibility of a kind of faultless disagreement that rejects truth-relativity. We will argue below, though, that our account has a number of important advantages over the position Schafer advocates. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Some may doubt whether comparative judgements of this kind are genuinely aesthetic, especially since they make no reference to paradigmatic aesthetic properties (graceful, gaudy, dainty, dumpy etc.). We focus on such cases here because they closely parallel those discussed in Hume (1757/1875) but those who worry about the genuinely aesthetic status of D1 can easily substitute an example where Jane and Mary debate e.g. whether a particular musical work is graceful. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. It is, of course, a difficult matter to spell out exactly what conditions need to be met here. Fortunately a precise account of the requisite conditions is not required for our purposes (though see Kölbel (2004) and Wright (2008a) for some suggestions) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Lasersohn (2005) offers similar arguments. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The descriptions of these three positions we offer below are not entirely uncontroversial but they will suffice for our present purposes. 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 our focus here is largely on the dialectic between relativism and absolutism, however, we can safely ignore such complications. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Compare to the account of epistemic contextualism offered by Schaffer and Szabo (2014: 492-3). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This definition is in line with one standard use of ‘contextualism’. However, we should note that 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) and Schaffer (2011), among others, defend contextualism about taste-predicates. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. One can, of course, be a contextualist without holding that individual standards give rise to the context-sensitivity in question (see e.g. Glanzberg (2007)) but analogous concerns arise with respect to these alternative contextualist views. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For recent discussion of the disagreement objection to contextualism, and responses to it, see López de Sa (2008), Egan (2014), Baker (2012; 2014) and Huvenes (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In the literature this position is sometimes labelled ‘realism’. However, given the range of other views (in aesthetics and elsewhere) which already carry this label, we think that ‘absolutism’ runs less risk of engendering confusion. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Most prominently Kölbel (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. At this level of detail, the view we 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 our arguments turns on these distinctions, however, we will put them to one side. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. We will assume, for ease of exposition only, that beliefs are constitutively governed by norms rather than, say, by aims or functions but nothing in our argument hangs on this assumption. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Perhaps the option of endorsing a contradiction in aesthetic truth is not beyond the pale, but we will not consider it here. For relevant discussion, see Cooke (2002). Rovane (2010) argues that a version of the contradiction challenge still faces relativists. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See e.g. Marques (2014), Baker (2014), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009), MacFarlane (2014), and Huvenes (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Exceptions to this sufficiency claim are introduced when we consider (as we will briefly below) certain paraconsistent versions of absolutist semantics. Our own view is not a paraconsistent one, though, so this caveat need not concern us. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For discussions of such issues see Kieran (2008), Levinson (2002), and Ross (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. It might be objected that a parallel worry arises concerning faultlessness on paracomplete views. We address such worries at length in §6. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Further norms will be required to give a full account of Humean Absolutism. For instance, if some ideal critic endorses *p*, and some ideal critic endorses not-*p*, HAT does not rule out our endorsing both *p* and not-*p*. So we will at least need some coherence constraint in addition to HAT. One strategy here would be to characterize the norms in a holistic fashion, such that one should endorse a set of contents {*p1*, *p2*…*pn*} 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. An assumption which is, of course, shared by our relativist opponents. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. For defences of pessimism see Hopkins (2000) and Gorodeisky (2010). For criticism see Meskin (2004) and Robson (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. A further possibility which we will not pursue here is that merely having a true belief is not sufficient for meeting the relevant success norm and that something else – most obviously knowledge – is required. This view strikes us as, at least, plausible but it can easily be adapted for our purposes by replacing a knowledge norm in aesthetics with a knowledge\* norm where knowledge\* is identical with knowledge except that it requires not that the belief in question be true but merely that it accords with the judgement of some ideal critic. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See e.g. Baker (2012) for discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. For more on the distinction between these two kinds of disagreement see Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009: 60-61). Egan (2014: 76) proposes a similar distinction between disagreement in thought and disagreement in discourse. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Williams offers additional arguments for this view (ibid. 217-20) and presents an alternative formulation elsewhere (Williams 2014). Maudlin (2004) defends a similar position (though phrased in terms of ungroundedness rather than indeterminacy *per se*). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Thanks to Matthew Kieran, Aaron Meskin, Pekka Väyrynen, Guy Longworth, Giulia Pravato, Robbie Williams, Jesse Prinz, Noël Carroll, Max Kölbel, James Andow, Alexandra Plakias, and an anonymous referee for the journal for comments on earlier versions of this work. Thanks also to audiences at the University of Leeds and the Northern Institute of Philosophy (Aberdeen) for discussion of these issues. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)