

THE POSSIBILITY OF REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT

1. Introduction

In the essay “Reasonable Religious Disagreements,” Dr. Richard Feldman examines reasonable disagreements between peers.¹ More specifically, he asks whether such disagreements are possible, and also whether the parties to such a disagreement could think that both their own belief *and* the belief of their peer with whom they disagree are reasonable. Feldman argues that there cannot be any such thing as a reasonable disagreement, and furthermore, that the parties to a disagreement are not epistemically licensed to think that their own belief *and* their opponents belief are both reasonable. As Feldman notes, “open and honest discussion seems to have the puzzling effect of making reasonable disagreement impossible”.²

My project herein will be (in §2) to explain Feldman’s notion of a reasonable disagreement, and then reconstruct and assess his argumentation, and (in §3) advance three objections to Feldman’s argument. I will focus on denying Feldman’s answer to his first question—that reasonable disagreement between peers is not possible—and my suggestion is

¹ Although Feldman focuses in particular on religious disagreement, his account extends to other realms of disagreement. So, I won’t restrict my discussion of this topic to only religious disagreement.

² Feldman in Goldman & Whitcomb (2011), p. 145; my emphasis.

that *if* any of these three objections to Feldman’s argument go through, then the argument falls. And if Feldman’s argument falls, then his argument no longer provides grounds for our thinking that reasonable disagreement is impossible.

2. Feldman’s Account of Reasonable Disagreement³

2.1 Merely Apparent vs. Genuine Disagreement

Right away, Feldman excludes from the domain of interest so-called “merely apparent and not genuine” disagreements.⁴ To that end, Feldman suggests the following four varieties of disagreements count as “merely apparent”: (i) disagreements which are *not* the result of disputants holding incompatible attitudes toward a single proposition (or some member of a set of exclusive propositions); (ii) disagreements arising from the fact that particular English words have more than one conventional meaning; (iii) disagreements arising through incompatible activities or lifestyles; and (iv) disagreements arising between people whose perspectives radically disagree due to their different locations in space or time (consider Feldman’s ‘Ancient flat-Earthers’ example). Excluding items (i)-(iv) is intended to narrow the scope of enquiry to only the “genuine” disagreements.

2.2 Clarifying the Questions & Terminology

So what, exactly, does Feldman think the relevant cases for analysis are in a discussion of disagreement? To begin with, a more precise articulation of Feldman’s questions is in order. In his essay, he formulates his questions as follows:

Q1: Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence have reasonable disagreements?

Q2: Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence reasonably maintain their own

³ Due to limitations in length, this paper’s reconstruction of Feldman’s account is briefer than I’d like. However, I believe that the most salient points to both his project and mine are elucidated herein.

⁴ Feldman in Goldman & Whitcomb (2011), p. 142.

belief yet also think that the other party to the disagreement is also reasonable?⁵

Some clarification of terminology will aid our understanding of Feldman's questions, and thus our understanding of what sorts of disagreements he has in mind. When Feldman says *epistemic peers*, he refers to people that are "roughly equal with respect to intelligence, reasoning powers, background information, etc." And when Feldman says peers have *shared their evidence*, this means they have "had a full discussion of a topic and have not withheld relevant information". Furthermore, Feldman understands a *disagreement* (simpliciter) to be that which exists between two people "when one believes a proposition and the other denies (i.e., disbelieves) that proposition." And a *reasonable disagreement* exists between two people "when they have a disagreement and each is reasonable (or justified) in his or her belief." Finally, Feldman says a belief is *reasonable* "when it has adequate evidential support."⁶ This is to distinguish the evidential or epistemic reasonable-ness of a belief from other varieties of reasonable-ness (e.g., prudential or practical).

With these terminological clarifications in hand and Feldman's paring of cases, we can now understand Q1 as asking whether two people of roughly similar cognitive endowment and who have shared all of their (relevant) information can disagree about the truth of some proposition, and each be justified in their respective stance toward that proposition.⁷ And *that* is what Feldman thinks is the relevant sort of case to be analyzed in our discussion of disagreement. Further, Feldman believes that thorough considerations of such cases cannot lead to affirmative answers to Q1 and Q2.

⁵ Ibid, p. 144.

⁶ Ibid; all of the foregoing terms are defined on pp. 144-5.

⁷ As stated in the introduction, I will concern myself primarily with Feldman's Q1. Thus, I will not—and have no need to—elaborate on Q2 here.

2.3 The Uniqueness Thesis

Upon clarifying terms and winnowing the field of enquiry, Feldman then posits a crucial component in his account: the ‘Uniqueness Thesis’. Feldman formulates the Uniqueness Thesis (UT) as follows:

UT: A body of evidence justifies at most one proposition out of a competing set of propositions (e.g., one theory out of a bunch of exclusive alternatives) and that it justifies at most one attitude toward any particular proposition.⁸

The exclusivity of the members within the competing set of propositions just means that the truth of one proposition implies the falsity of its competitors. And the relevant attitudes that the body of evidence can justify are constrained to *believing*, *disbelieving*, and *suspending judgment*.⁹

Feldman motivates (but does not argue for) UT by providing a thought experiment about a detective with equally strong evidence for the guilt of two different criminals (named Lefty & Righty), who also knows that only one of the criminals is *actually* guilty. At first, this case appears to be one in which the detective could reasonably believe that Lefty is guilty and also reasonably believe that Righty is guilty. And if instead of just one there were two detectives, D1 & D2, each in possession of the exact same body of evidence, then D1 & D2 could each hold one of the two beliefs formerly held by the single detective. So, D1 could reasonably believe that

⁸ Feldman in Goldman & Whitcomb (2011), p. 148.

⁹ Although Feldman restricts the possible attitudes one might have toward some proposition, *p*, it nevertheless could be that there are other attitudes to hold with respect to *p*. For instance *faith* might be one of these. As Dan Howard-Snyder puts it “A wife might have faith that her marriage will survive a crisis while harboring doubts about it. Indeed, propositional faith is precisely that attitude in virtue of which she might possess the inner stability and impetus that enables her to contribute to the realization of that state of affairs, despite her lack of certainty.” (Howard-Snyder, 2013, *Propositional Faith: What It Is And What It Is Not*, p. 3). I’m not entirely certain what to make of the relationship between *faith* and *a body of evidence*. But the way Feldman formulates the Uniqueness Thesis and defines ‘reasonable’ seems *prima facie* to concern itself only with attitudes that are justified *given the evidence*, and to exclude anything else.

Lefty is guilty, while D2 could reasonably believe that Righty is guilty. And in this case, each would be justified in their belief, their beliefs would be contrary, and so this would be a paradigm case of a reasonable disagreement.

But upon closer inspection of this case, Feldman says that the “evidence for Righty is evidence against Lefty” being guilty, and so—since this is a sort of zero-sum game—if Righty is guilty Lefty is not (and vice-versa). Thus, rather than the detectives each being justified in their beliefs, neither of their beliefs have adequate evidential support, and in that case the epistemically responsible thing to do would be for D1 and D2 to suspend judgment. Feldman concludes from this thought experiment that “Thinking about the case of Lefty and Righty suggests that one cannot reasonably choose belief or disbelief in a case like this,” and that “reflection on the case of Lefty and Righty lends strong support to The Uniqueness Thesis.”¹⁰

2.4 Feldman’s Argument

The foregoing reconstruction of Feldman’s thinking should leave us situated to understand the argument for his negative answers to Q1 and Q2. His argument can be formulated something like the following:

Feldman’s Argument Against Reasonable Disagreement¹¹

- 1.) If the Uniqueness Thesis is correct, then for any two F-Disputants, A & B, and some proposition, p, A & B cannot reasonably disagree (w/ each other) regarding the truth of p.
- 2.) The Uniqueness Thesis is correct.
- 3.) [So] For any two F-Disputants, A & B, and some proposition, p, A & B cannot reasonably disagree (w/ each other) regarding the truth of p.
- 4.) If (2) & (3), then if A & B cannot reasonably agree regarding the truth of p, then reason requires that both A & B must suspend judgment.
- 5.) ∴ For any two F-Disputants, A & B, and some proposition, p, if A & B cannot reasonably agree regarding the truth of p, then reason requires that both A & B must suspend judgment.

¹⁰ Quotes from Feldman in Goldman & Whitcomb (2011), p. 148.

¹¹ Feldman does not himself provide a formalized argument for his position. I believe this to be a charitable interpretation of Feldman’s argument.

Premise (1) comes straight out of his discussion of the ‘Lefty & Righty’ case, and something very much like (1) is explicitly stated in the text.¹² Additionally, I use the term ‘*F-Disputants*’ (short for ‘*Feldmanian Disputants*’) to capture Feldman’s conditions that persons A & B must be both epistemic peers *and* have shared all their evidence relevant to a proposition, *p*.¹³ Premise (2) appeals to Feldman’s thoughts quoted at the end of the previous section (i.e., “reflection on the case of Lefty and Righty lends strong support to The Uniqueness Thesis.”). Premise (3)—also a sub-conclusion—amounts to Feldman’s response to Q1; that no, two peers cannot have a reasonable disagreement. Premise (4) simply says that if (3) is correct and that the Uniqueness Thesis is correct—particularly that the relevant attitudes that the body of evidence can justify are constrained to *believing*, *disbelieving*, and *suspending judgment*—then of course the disputants must agree to suspend judgment. And that is precisely what the argument concludes, which amounts to Feldman’s *modest skeptical alternative*, and his negative response to Q2. For if the two F-disputants must suspend their judgment, then they will not have differing positions, and thus will not be able to fulfill the conditions of which Q2 enquires.

3. Some Objections to Feldman’s Argument Against Reasonable Disagreement

3.1 Objection #1—Sharing Evidence Isn’t Enough

The first objection to register is against Premise (1) of Feldman’s argument, and has to do with the notion of sharing evidence. Suppose that I have had some sort of unprecedented, overwhelming, and life-altering religious experience (LRE), and further suppose that this, along

¹² Feldman in Goldman & Whitcomb (2011), p. 142, 2nd full ¶.

¹³ I use the term ‘F-Disputant’ here, rather than my earlier term ‘Ideal Disputant’, because there is a significant gap between what Feldman requires for two individuals to be party to a genuine disagreement, and what one might construe as an ‘Ideal disputant’; namely, that ‘Ideal Disputants’ would be something like “intellectual doppelgangers”—something considerably stronger than what Feldman stipulates. Credit goes to Dr. Dan Howard-Snyder for bringing this to my attention.

with my other beliefs, provides the grounds for my believing the truth of the following proposition, *p*:

p: A God exists.

Now suppose that I run into Uncle Joe (an epistemic peer), and relate to him my belief that *p*.

Upon hearing this, Uncle Joe relates to me his *dis*-belief that *p*. So we disagree. We then engage in a thorough discussion wherein we share all of our evidence relevant to our attitude toward *p*.

During the course of the conversation I explain to Uncle Joe my LRE, and how this bit of evidence figures prominently in my reasons for believing that *p*. Then, Uncle Joe tells me of his observation of what he takes to be *incalculable, unjustifiable, and widespread human pain and suffering in the world*, and that this observation figures prominently into *his* reasons for *dis*-believing that *p*. So, my suggestion is that *if* I have some such piece of *private evidence* (to use Feldman's terminology) as my LRE and uncle Joe does not (or has some private evidence that contradicts my private evidence), then I have something that justifies my attitude, and Uncle Joe has something that justifies his attitude, even after sharing. And if that's the case, then it turns out we can engage in a reasonable disagreement after all, and premise (1) falls.

Anticipating something like this objection, Feldman has a response. He appeals to a thought experiment wherein an epistemic peer and I look out the office window into the quad and privately form contradictory beliefs about the presence of the Dean in the quad. I then tell my peer that I see the Dean in the Quad, and my peer responds by telling me that he sees that the quad is empty; that the Dean is not in the quad. Feldman—who says that this example of *sightful* disagreement is analogous to *insightful* (read personal evidence related) disagreement—draws two conclusions. First, in either the *sightful* or *insightful* case described, the only reasonable thing to do would be for both parties to suspend judgment. Second that even if, say, Uncle Joe

and I have conflicting private evidence (my experience vs. his observation), because we shared our evidence, we informed each other of our respective private evidences. And this, says Feldman, should level the evidential playing-field, because “evidence of evidence *is* evidence”.¹⁴ In other words, just because I don’t have Uncle Joe’s intuition or related observations, and he doesn’t have my LRE doesn’t entail that we can’t hold them as evidence; that is, once Uncle Joe and I verbally relate these facts to each other, we obtain evidence of evidence, which is, according to Feldman, evidence.

Here are my responses to Feldman’s ‘Dean in the Quad’ example. First, I think that Feldman’s analogy is a poor one. It is disanalogous to the case of my LRE, because whereas my epistemic peer and I both have the same sort of physical & perceptual access to the Dean were we to walk down to the quad and investigate, no such equivalent access exists for my LRE; Uncle Joe can’t walk over to the object of my LRE and touch or feel it, and he certainly doesn’t recall or experience it the way I have. So, Feldman’s analogy is inapplicable insofar as it ignores this salient difference.

Second, merely verbally relating my LRE to Uncle Joe does not convey the entirety of the “evidential force” it has provided for me. Evidence of evidence might be evidence, but it is certainly not any more compelling than is *reading* an account of a bear attack, rather than *being the victim of* a bear attack; my LRE outstrips its narrative counter-part. David Hume captured this important difference very well in the following passage:

“All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most *force and violence*, we may name impressions: and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas I mean the *faint images* of these in thinking and reasoning; such as, for instance, are all the perceptions excited by the present discourse...”¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 151; my emphasis.

¹⁵ Hume (1738), p. 1; my emphasis.

So, using Hume’s lingo, my life-altering religious experience has a sort of vividness and force that is distinctly absent in the idea that my peer has when I relate this experience to them in speech or in writing. And lacking such vividness and force, it simply isn’t as *compelling* a bit of evidence for my peer as it is for me. This brings us to the next objection.

3.2 Objection #2—Privileging Private/Internal Evidence

Feldman does not agree that private evidence or inner *perceptions* should carry more evidential weight than a verbal account of them. On this notion he says

“...each knows about the other’s insight. Each knows that this insight has evidential force. And now *I see no basis for either of them justifying his own belief simply because the one insight happens to occur inside of him.*”¹⁶

My response to this—and the second objection to premise (1)—is that we *do* have a reason to justify our beliefs, but based *not simply* on personal insight (the sharing of which doesn’t produce a similar attitude in our peer; see §3.1), *but also* based on the incommunicable, phenomenal qualia that are at least partially constitutive of or accompany our own experiences or insights.¹⁷ In other words, it is precisely because of that compelling vividness, or “force and violence” that Hume was on about. And if this incommunicable, phenomenal qualia or vividness of experience—despite our verbally relating that experience—has more evidential force or weight for us than for our peer, then we might find ourselves believing proposition *p*, while our peer, having only the “faint image” formed from a verbal or written description of our LRE, is not so justified, and thus might dis-believe that *p*.¹⁸ And in that case, we have shared evidence

¹⁶ Feldman in Goldman & Whitcomb (2011), p. 151; my emphasis.

¹⁷ Credit is due to J. Rosenbaum, E. Beszhak, T. Le, & B. Holz for conversations wherein this objection was inspired.

¹⁸ Another way to motivate this idea would be to consider providing a blind individual an exhaustive verbal account of my experience of being-presented-to-purplely. No matter the completeness of my verbal account, there will nevertheless be some compelling, phenomenal aspect that is markedly absent in such an account. And so, the blind person cannot understand the totality of my experience—the experience of being-presented-to-purplely—despite my giving an exhaustive verbal account of it; they need to “see for themselves”, so to speak.

amongst epistemic peers (in the Feldmanian sense), and yet we disagree. So, here again we would have a case of reasonable disagreement.

Another reason to believe that our inner states should be privileged, is that in the essay “Internalism Defended,” Feldman asserts the following: “The justificatory status of a person’s doxastic attitudes *strongly supervenes on the person’s occurrent and dispositional mental states, events, and conditions,*” and that, “being epistemically justified in certain attitudes, or having attitudes with certain contents [is] *settled by what goes on inside cognitive beings.*”^{19 20} The point I am trying to drive home here, is that my religious experience is something that occurred within me, that the memories and influence of this experience reside in me, and that no amount of communication can furnish my epistemic peers with the totality of my internal cognitive content. At best, I can furnish them with a “faint image”. And this may well fail to be as justificatorially compelling for my peer as the original experience was for me. If so, Feldman’s account is in trouble.

3.3 Objection #3—Applying the Uniqueness Thesis to Itself

The final objection I will advance is aimed at premise (2) of Feldman’s argument. The objection goes something like this.²¹ Say I have read some convincing philosophical essay, the outcome of which is that I now harbor the belief that UT is false. Later, I engage in a discussion with John about the merits of UT, and John asserts that he believes UT to be true. Now, John and I are epistemic peers, and have engaged in a thorough discussion sharing all of our evidence, but nevertheless, our respective positions are unchanged. According to UT, the epistemically responsible thing to do would be for both of us to suspend our judgments; that is, suspend our

¹⁹ Conee & Feldman (2001), p. 2; my emphasis.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 3; my emphasis.

²¹ This objection was inspired Lynne Baker’s paper (see ‘References’ page), wherein she raises a similar objection to UT on p. 142.

judgment about whether or not UT is true or false. But in that case—if we have no reasonable grounds to say it is either true or false—we assign no truth value to UT. And in that case, premise (2) of Feldman’s argument doesn’t hold, and so neither does the conclusion. Thus, we would both have a case of reasonable disagreement, and Feldman’s argument would fail to establish the impossibility of such a disagreement.

§4. Conclusion

Dr. Richard Feldman has asserted in his essay “Reasonable Religious Disagreements” that it is impossible for Feldmanian disputants to have a reasonable disagreement, and furthermore, that the parties to a disagreement are not epistemically licensed to think that both their own belief *and* their opponent’s belief are reasonable. My goal throughout this paper has been to first recount Feldman’s account, and secondly, to raise objections to his argument against reasonable disagreement. Furthermore, I have suggested that if any of the three objections raised against his argument go through, then the entire argument falls, and thus fails to establish the impossibility of such disagreements. And in that case, we have defended the notion that in certain cases, reasonable disagreement is not impossible. You, of course, are free to disagree.

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