

Faultless, Persistent, and Deep Moral Disagreement

Two assumptions are popular in current debates about moral disagreement: first, that moral realism presupposes the resolvability (at least in principle) of every moral disagreement, and second, that the best explanation of faultless disagreement is moral relativism. I will argue against both assumptions. Instead of explaining faultless moral disagreement by relativism, I suggest that its reason is ethical pluralism. This means that there is a plurality of basic moral principles which may conflict and cannot be reduced to just one principle or arranged in a general hierarchical order. Thus, every moral realism that endorses a fundamental ethical pluralism about moral values can easily explain faultless moral disagreement. Therefore, moral relativism is not the best explanation for faultless moral disagreement.

I further argue that there are two kinds of faultless moral disagreements that are based on different understandings of “faultlessness”. Some of them are faultless in the above defined sense. They are based on incommensurable moral values. Each party to such a disagreement has true and justified moral beliefs. I suggest calling this kind of faultless moral disagreement “persistent”. Other disagreements combine local disagreements about moral issues with disputes about fundamental epistemic principles. The problem regarding our fundamental epistemic principles is that we cannot justify them without presupposing, at some point, their reliability. Since the justification for our fundamental epistemic principles is circular, others holding different fundamental epistemic principles should not be convinced by our arguments (and vice versa). Therefore, these kinds of disagreements are also faultless, but in a different sense. They are faultless insofar as each party to the disagreement holds exactly the belief that is in accordance with their fundamental epistemic principles. I suggest calling this kind of faultless moral disagreement “deep”.

Therefore, we need to differentiate between three different types of genuine moral disagreement: resolvable, persistent, and deep moral disagreement. While resolvable moral disagreement might need a lot of work, it is principally resolvable like any other disagreement that is based on mistakes one party to the disagreement has made. Persistent and deep moral disagreements are more problematic because they are not resolvable in a direct way. Persistent moral disagreement is based on a different weighting and balancing of moral values while acknowledging a shared background of value commitments and epistemic principles. Deep moral disagreements combine local disagreements about moral issues with disagreements about fundamental epistemic principles. Nevertheless, the proposed account suggests that we are only justified to remain steadfast in our own beliefs in moral disagreements in which we have no reason to assume that the other party has made a mistake, if we either acknowledge that the beliefs of those disagreeing with us are itself justified (in case of persistent disagreement) or that all involved moral beliefs rely ultimately on circularly justified fundamental epistemic principles (in case of deep disagreement). This speaks in favor of seeking reasonable compromise in most moral disagreements although we are justified to remain steadfast in persistent and deep moral disagreements.