

# Equal Validity and Disagreement

## Comments on Baghramian and Coliva's *Relativism*\*

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### Abstract

Baghramian and Coliva (2020) have correctly identified the crux of the problem facing truth relativism: reconciling the idea that two parties to a dispute genuinely disagree, with the idea that their standpoints are (in some sense) equally valid and their judgments equally correct. I explain how my view aims to reconcile Disagreement with (something worth calling) Equal Validity, and I discuss Baghramian and Coliva's charge that I have secured, at best, a weak simulacrum of either.

I applaud Maria Baghramian and Annalisa Coliva (henceforth B&C) for writing this book. Like Baghramian's earlier book of the same title (Baghramian 2004), it aims to be a comprehensive critical survey, but unlike the earlier book it engages extensively with the large literature on relativism that emerged in the first two decades of this century. This is, to my knowledge, the first survey of relativism that covers this recent literature, in dialogue with earlier relativist traditions.

The book's scope is enormous. "Relativism," as B&C think of it, is a tent big enough to hold Protagoras, Nietzsche, William Hamilton, David Bloor, Nelson Goodman, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bruno Latour, Thomas Kuhn, Lorraine Code, Gilbert Harman, Carol Rovane, and Peter Lasersohn. I think it is an interesting exercise to look at these thinkers' very different views as instances of a single kind, *relativism*. But I'm skeptical of the effort, in Chapter 1, to delineate the kind with a set of necessary conditions or essential features (Non-absolutism, Dependence, Multiplicity, Incompatibility, and Equal Validity). If these features are to apply throughout the big tent, they must be formulated extremely vaguely. "Relativism" in its broadest sense might better be thought of as a family resemblance term.

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Left outside this big tent, it seems, are contextualist views (which do not accept Anti-Absolutism):

It is important to note that multiplicity is not sufficient for relativism. For instance, contextualist proposals – let them be in semantics (DeRose 1999) or in epistemology (Williams 1991) – allow for it. But they also restrict each verdict to a specific, insulated context. Thus, for instance, it may be known that P in a low stake context and not-known that P in a high stake one (while P being the same content in the two ascriptions of knowledge or lack thereof). And within each context, it is known or not-known that P absolutely. (Baghramian and Coliva 2020, 8–9)

I would have thought that you count as a “relativist,” in the broadest sense of the term, if you think that aesthetic judgments always involve implicit reference to a standard of taste, and that there are many legitimate standards of taste, none of them privileged over the others. (In this sense we are all relativists about 3:00 PM.) But because this sort of view is a kind of contextualism, it would seem to be excluded.<sup>1</sup> However, B&C do not seem entirely consistent on this issue: they spend ten pages in Chapter 9 discussing Gilbert Harman’s moral relativism, which is explicitly cashed out as a form of contextualism (229–38).

In my own work, I have preferred to use the term “relativism” more narrowly, for views that allow two judgments to disagree while both being correct, in some objective sense (and not just in the epistemic sense of being justified or warranted).<sup>2</sup> This characterization excludes contextualism, because contextualism is a way of denying that apparently conflicting judgments really disagree. But it also excludes views that posit fundamental conceptual incommensurability, making both agreement and disagreement impossible.

One advantage of using “relativism” in this narrower sense is that it isolates a definite philosophical problem that must be solved: reconciling the “disagrees” and the “both are correct” parts of the characterization, which seem *prima facie* to be incompatible. Call this “the relativist’s task.” B&C discuss my attempts to square this circle in Chapter 3 and parts of Chapter 8, so I will mostly confine my comments to these sections of their book.

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<sup>1</sup>In MacFarlane (forthcoming), I argue that Protagoras’s view might best be understood as a form of contextualism; if that is right, then even Protagoras falls outside of B&C’s big tent!

<sup>2</sup>It is not controversial that two people can have justified beliefs that disagree: they might, for example, have different evidence.

A natural first step towards accomplishing the relativist's task is to allow that the propositions we express using sentences like "that is tasty" have truth values not just relative to a state of the world, but relative to a *taste* (or perhaps to something like a *perspective* or *judge* that determines a taste). This would allow the same proposition to be true relative to one person's taste but false relative to another's. It would allow one party to assert that licorice is tasty and another party to assert the contradictory proposition—that licorice is not tasty—and for both to have said something true, relative to their respective tastes. If we hold that an assertion is correct (absolutely!) if it is true relative to the speaker's taste at the context of use, then we can say that both of these assertions are correct, even though they disagree. Max Kölbel ably defended this view in his book *Truth Without Objectivity* (Kölbel 2002).

In my work I have argued that this is not enough to accomplish the relativist's task. The sort of view Kölbel defends secures a *kind* of disagreement: since the two parties believe and assert incompatible propositions, neither could (rationally) accept the proposition the other accepts without a change in view. (I call this kind of disagreement *doxastic non-cotenability*.<sup>3</sup>) But robust disagreement requires more than that; it requires thinking that the other person has *got it wrong*. Views that relativize the truth of propositions, but allow the correctness of assertions and judgments to be absolute, do not secure this. Each party can agree that the other's judgment is (absolutely) correct. I have used the term *nonindexical contextualism* for views with this shape, to highlight their agreement with standard "indexical" contextualism as regards the absoluteness of correctness and the absence of robust disagreement.

B&C agree with this diagnosis. They claim that disagreement requires not just doxastic noncotenability, but an additional condition they call the "aboutness condition."<sup>4</sup> This condition is met if "the acceptance of these [incompatible] contents concerns the same circumstances" (78). A "circumstance" here comprises at least a world, time, and taste. A judgment *concerns* a circumstance if its correctness depends on the truth of its content at that circumstance: thus, for example, all contingent judgments concern the actual world (the world of the context of use), even though the actual world does not figure in their contents. On nonindexical contextualist views, taste judgments concern the tastes of the speaker. Accordingly,

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<sup>3</sup>On p. 80 B&C seem to confuse this with *preclusion of joint satisfaction*, which is something else altogether.

<sup>4</sup>This label is unfortunate, given the distinction Perry (1986) makes between "about" and "concerns". On a nonindexical contextualist view, taste judgments are not *about* any particular taste—their contents have different truth values relative to different tastes—but they do *concern* a particular taste (MacFarlane 2014, 92).

taste judgments made by speakers with different tastes do not concern the same circumstances and so fail to meet this necessary condition for disagreement.

To secure a more robust kind of disagreement, I have argued, we need to think of the truth of judgments as relative both to the context of use and to a context of assessment. This move allows us to introduce a notion of “accuracy” that is not absolute, but relative to contexts of assessment. An assertion of  $p$  at context  $c_1$  is accurate, as assessed from context  $c_2$ , just in case  $p$  is true as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ . Thus, an assertion of “licorice is tasty” at one context can be accurate as assessed from that context, and inaccurate as assessed from another. This gives us a kind of disagreement that is stronger than mere doxastic noncotenability. For both parties to the disagreement can agree that the accuracy of each party’s assertion precludes the accuracy of the other’s (even if they disagree about *which* is the accurate one). I call this kind of disagreement *preclusion of joint accuracy*.<sup>5</sup>

Evans (1985) famously denied that we could make sense of a relativized notion of correctness, but I disagree. A relativized notion of accuracy can figure in norms for assertion and retraction, as follows:

*Assertion Norm* One ought to make only assertions that are accurate as assessed relative to one’s current context.

*Retraction Norm* One ought to retract earlier assertions that are not accurate, as assessed relative to one’s current context.

Given these norms, the difference between nonindexical contextualism and relativism comes down to this. The relativist will say that the accuracy of a taste assertion, relative to a context of assessment, depends on the taste of the assessor at that context, while the nonindexical contextualist will say that it depends on the taste of the asserter at the context at which the assertion is made. When the context of assessment and the context of assertion coincide, these two views will agree. Hence, both will predict that one ought to assert that licorice is tasty only if licorice is tasty according to one’s taste at one’s current context. But the views will diverge in their predictions about when this assertion ought to be retracted. If one’s tastes change, so that licorice no longer appeals to one’s current tastes, the nonindexical contextualist will still regard the earlier assertion as accurate and hold that one is

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<sup>5</sup>Note that, on this view, taste assertions do not concern any specific taste (see MacFarlane 2014, 92.) Hence, trivially, they “concern the same circumstances” and the “aboutness condition” is met, contrary to what B&C allege (Baghramian and Coliva 2020, 78).

not obliged to retract it. The relativist, by contrast, will hold that the earlier assertion must be retracted, since it is not accurate relative to one's current context.

The retraction norm gives a direct significance to inaccuracy for one's *own* assertions, and if you think about disagreement with your past self, you will begin to see why relativism can do better than nonindexical contextualism at securing disagreement. When it comes to other people's assertions, though, we have to see the significance of the norm more indirectly. The mere fact that someone else's assertion is inaccurate, as assessed from *your* context, does not require *them* to retract it. However, if their context were to change in the right way—if their tastes were to change, for example—then they would be required to retract. Thus, a change in the other's context can affect whether they are obliged to retract. This is what sets relativism apart from both contextualism and objectivism.

At this point, you might be ready to concede that the kind of disagreement I have just described (preclusion of joint accuracy) is more robust than what we have with nonindexical contextualism (doxastic noncotenability), while still thinking that it falls short of the kind of disagreement we get about paradigmatically objective matters (what I call *preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy*<sup>6</sup>). I'm happy to accept this: I regard it as a feature, not a bug (MacFarlane 2014, ch. 6). We should respect the phenomena: disagreements about taste seem like genuine disagreements, and they do not just go away once the parties recognize that they have different tastes. Still, they seem different from (say) disagreements about the age of the earth, for we understand that they are going to be resolved (if at all) not by uncovering new facts, but by cultivating tastes. What blocks philosophical progress here is the phrase "real disagreement," which misleadingly presupposes that there is only one thing worth calling "disagreement," forcing us into an unpalatable dilemma: either deny that disagreements of taste are disagreements at all, or affirm that they are no different from disagreements about paradigmatically objective matters.

Having sketched my approach to the relativist's task, let me now turn to the objections B&C have raised against it. Their criticism has two prongs. First, they doubt that relativist preclusion of joint accuracy is sufficient for "real disagreement" in the cases at issue. Second, they argue that the very move that allows me to secure the more robust kind of disagreement, preclusion of joint accuracy, precludes me from recognizing something that is essential to relativism: Equal Validity or the

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<sup>6</sup>Two judgments exhibit preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy just in case the accuracy of one, as assessed from its owner's context, precludes the accuracy of the other, as assessed from its owner's context (MacFarlane 2014, 130).

legitimacy of other perspectives.

Their first charge seems to me to rest on a failure to attend to the distinction between disagreement in the activity sense and disagreement in the state sense.<sup>7</sup> Consider the following passage:

... if apprised of their situation of occupying different contexts of assessment, each of the contenders should agree that, within their context of assessment, the other is right to believe that proposition true (or false), even though they themselves regard it as false (or true) within their own context of assessment. In such a situation, disputes should not continue: everyone should agree – if they were rational – that the other is assessing the same proposition while occupying a different context of assessment and that therefore the other side is right, according to its standards. The discussion should just end there, with the acknowledgement of a draw. . .  
(82)

I think that B&C underestimate the degree to which one can change another's tastes through discussion, by calling attention to features, drawing analogies, and so on. But leave that aside. It is true that in many disputes of taste we hit a wall: our attempts to bring the other to our way of seeing things go nowhere, and we move on to more productive topics of conversation. But that just brings a stop to our disagreement in the *activity* sense (our "dispute"). It doesn't make our disagreement in the *state* sense go away! We still think that the other party is wrong; we're not at all inclined to say, "you were right all along." Indeed, one sometimes hits this kind of wall in discussions about perfectly objective matters. The fact that I've given up disputing about the age of the earth with Biblical literalists does not mean that we no longer disagree. Given the history of our discussions, I have no reason to believe that further argument would lead to any resolution of our disagreement, and it would be irrational for me to spend any more time engaging in it. But we still disagree about the age of the earth.

A similar slide occurs in this argument, from Chapter 8:

Our contention is that if a relativist did think about how they fit together, she would have to recognize that the other person is right, given her context of assessment, and therefore that there is no point in going on

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<sup>7</sup>B&C are aware of this distinction and mention it elsewhere, but they do not seem to see its relevance to their criticism.

disputing. But if there is no point in disputing and that practice is based on ignorance of the real normative trappings of the discourse at hand, then there is no reason to prefer MacFarlane's semantics over rival ones because of its superiority in accounting for disagreement and retraction. (Baghramian and Coliva 2020, 221)

"No point in going on disputing" (in the activity sense) does not imply "no point in disagreeing" (in the state sense). A relativist view need not show that it is rational to continue engaging in argument in order to vindicate the idea that the two parties disagree.

B&C's second charge is independent of their first. Even if I do vindicate disagreement, they think, my view fails to vindicate Equal Validity, and hence fails to be relativist:

By invoking a specific point of view – the one of the assessor – for evaluating a given belief or assertion and by being able to salvage disagreement among parties and retraction only by so doing, MacFarlane seems to have betrayed the overall philosophical motivation for going relativist. *True, there may be multiple assessors, but each of them will assess the truth (or falsity) of the proposition absolutely. That is, none of them could make room, within their context of assessment, for the idea that different verdicts are equally legitimate.* That is, from one's context of assessment, if someone else judges false 'Sushi is tasty', they are wrong and have made a mistake. By contrast, it seemed of the essence of relativism, particularly in the context of taste discourse, that opposite parties to a debate could recognize, perhaps after the first moves in the conversation, that the other party is equally right and entitled to their view. (p. 84, emphasis added)

B&C are right to point out that on my view, each of the disagreeing parties regards the other's judgment as inaccurate. That is just what distinguishes my view from nonindexical contextualism. But there certainly *is* a sense, on my view, in which both parties can recognize that the other's verdict is "equally legitimate." For both can recognize that, given the norms for assertion and retraction, the other was in their rights to assert what they did (since it is accurate as assessed from the context in which they asserted it), and that they are not obliged to retract it now (since it is accurate as assessed from the context they now occupy). These facts about the correctness of particular acts of assertion or retraction are non-epistemic

and absolute. But there is another non-epistemic sense of correctness—namely *accuracy*—which is perspectival. The kind of disagreement we have in relativist discourse precludes joint correctness in the latter sense, but not in the former sense.<sup>8</sup>

Why do B&C say that the two parties in my relativist practice assess the truth or accuracy of each others' claims "absolutely"? Perhaps it is because these parties reject each others' assertions using the monadic predicates "false" and "inaccurate." But we should be careful not to conflate monadicity and absoluteness. The statement that an assertion *A* is inaccurate does not commit the speaker to the *absolute* inaccuracy of *A*, on my view, because the monadic predicate "inaccurate" is itself assessment-sensitive. Claiming that *A* is inaccurate is, in fact, perfectly compatible with claiming that *A* is accurate as assessed from someone else's context.

So I think there is a perfectly reasonable sense of Equal Validity which my sort of relativist can accept. It may be that B&C are construing Equal Validity in a more demanding sense, which rules out this nuanced attitude towards the correctness of others' assertions and judgments. They may hold that if you take another's tastes or standards to lead them systematically to make assertions and judgments that are inaccurate, by your lights, then *ipso facto* you do not recognize these tastes or standards as "legitimate" or "on par" in the sense required by Equal Validity.

Clearly, if we understand Equal Validity in this more stringent sense and demand that any genuine form of relativism respect it, then relativism cannot be a position that reconciles Equal Validity with persistent disagreement. For disagreeing with someone, in any minimally robust sense, requires thinking that they've got it wrong. So if we insist, with B&C, on the strictest possible construal of Equal Validity as an essential feature of relativism, then the sort of view I have defended does not count as relativism, and what I have described as the relativist's task is impossible. The big tent begins to look surprisingly empty.

It is better, I think, to acknowledge that there is something worth calling Equal Validity that assessment-sensitive views can vindicate (and objectivist views cannot). Unlike contextualist and nonindexical contextualist views, they can do this without holding that the correctness of judgments and assertions is absolute. So it seems apt to call them "relativist." But I do not want to fight over a word. What is important is that we have the concepts to describe all of these views and see how they differ.

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<sup>8</sup>I hope nobody will think it a scandal that I acknowledge different senses of correctness. Even the most hardened antirelativist will grant that there are epistemic senses of correctness that can diverge from objective correctness. If you acknowledge assessment sensitivity, then there are going to be different kinds of non-epistemic correctness, too.



We can then evaluate how they relate to the disparate intellectual tendencies that have earned, claimed, or been saddled with the label “relativism.”

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