

# Baghramian and Coliva, *Relativism*

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## Abstract

Baghramian and Coliva have correctly identified the crux of the problem facing truth relativists: reconciling the idea that two parties to a dispute genuinely disagree, with the idea that their standpoints are equally valid and their judgments equally correct (in some sense). They argue that the moves I make to secure disagreement make me unable to secure equal validity. I explain how my view works and how it can resist their criticisms.

I applaud Maria Baghramian and Annalisa Coliva (henceforth B&C) for writing this book. This is the first comprehensive book on relativism of which I'm aware that makes an effort to engage with the extensive twenty-first century literature on relativism in analytic philosophy, 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 all these different positions as instances of a single kind. 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 are to apply to the whole big tent, they must be formulated extremely vaguely. *Relativism* in the broad sense might better be thought of as a family resemblance concept.

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, in the broadest sense of “relativism,” you could count as a relativist if you thought that aesthetic judgments always involved implicit reference to a standard of taste, but that there were many legitimate standards of taste, none of them privileged over the others. (In this sense we are all relativists about 3:00 PM.) Because this sort of view is a kind of contextualism, it would seem to be excluded. I have argued elsewhere that Protagoras’s view is best understood as a form of contextualism (MacFarlane 2019); if that’s right, he falls outside of B&C’s big tent too. 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 kind of contextualism (229–38).

In my own work, I have preferred to use the term “relativism” more narrowly, for views that allow two judgments or assertions that genuinely disagree to be, in some sense, both correct (and not just in the epistemic sense of being justified or warranted). This characterization excludes contextualism, since on contextualist views there is no disagreement. (If I say “I am cold” and you say “I am not cold,” we don’t disagree.) But it also excludes forms of relativism that invoke conceptual incommensurability, since they make both agreement and disagreement impossible.

The advantage, I think, of using “relativism” in this narrower way 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 on the face of it 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 the book.

A natural first step in this direction is to allow that the contents of our assertions and judgments—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 something like a “taste.” This would allow the same proposition to be true, in the actual world, 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 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've argued that this is not quite enough to accomplish the relativist's task. The view secures a *kind* of disagreement: after all, the two parties believe and assert incompatible propositions, and neither party could accept the proposition the other accepts without a change in view. (This is what I call *doxastic non-cotenability*.<sup>1</sup>) But real 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, don't secure this. (I have called views like this *nonindexical contextualism*, in recognition of their kinship, as regards the absoluteness of correctness and the absence of robust disagreement, with standard "indexical" contextualism.)

B&C agree with this diagnosis. They formulate a criterion for disagreement that imposes an additional condition, besides doxastic noncotenability, which they call the "aboutness condition":<sup>2</sup> "the acceptance of these contents concerns the same circumstances" (78). On nonindexical contextualist views, assertions concern the context of use (which is the only context relevant for evaluating their correctness), so taste judgements in different contexts do not 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 relative to contexts of assessment. An assertion of  $p$  at  $c_1$  is accurate, as assessed from  $c_2$ , 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 one party's assertion precludes the accuracy of the other's (even if they

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<sup>1</sup>On p. 80 B&C seem to confuse this with *preclusion of joint satisfaction*, which is something else altogether.

<sup>2</sup>The name is unfortunate, given the distinction Perry makes between "about" and "concerns"; see MacFarlane (2014), sec. 4.5.2. On a nonindexical contextualist view, taste judgments are not *about* any particular taste—their contents are taste-neutral propositions—but they *concern* a particular taste.

disagree about *who* is the accurate one). I call this kind of disagreement *preclusion of joint accuracy*.

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).

What is the practical significance of this notion of accuracy? Evans (1985) famously denied that we could make sense of a relativized notion of correctness, but I disagree. A relativized notion of accuracy<sup>3</sup> 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. 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 is no longer tasty according to one’s current tastes, the nonindexical contextualist will still regard the earlier assertion as accurate and hold that one is 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’ll already begin to see why relativism can do better than nonindexical contextualism at securing real disagreement. When it comes to other people’s assertions, we have to see the significance of the norm more indirectly. The mere fact that someone else’s assertion is inaccurate, as assessed from *our* context, doesn’t require *them* to retract it. But 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

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<sup>3</sup>Or, if you like, a doubly relativized truth predicate.

whether they are obligated to retract (this is what sets relativism apart from both contextualism and objectivism).

You might concede that the kind of disagreement I've described is more robust than what we have with nonindexical contextualism, while objecting that it still falls short of the Real Disagreement we get about fully objective matters (what I call *preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy*). 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 real disagreements, and they can persist even after the parties recognize that they have different tastes. Yet they seem different from, say, disagreements about the age of the earth. For we understand that they are going to be resolved in different ways: not by uncovering new facts, but by cultivating tastes. Once we see this, we should avoid the phrase "real disagreement," which misleadingly presupposes that there is only one thing worth calling "disagreement."

Now let me turn to the objections B&C have raised about my attempt to square the circle. Their central objection is that I privilege the assessor's perspective in a way that prevents me from making sense of the idea that the other party's perspective has "Equal Validity." Thus, 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, the legitimacy of other perspectives. Here is one representative passage:

By insisting that disputes about taste display disagreement in the sense of preclusion of joint accuracy, MacFarlane seems able to explain why people respond by saying "No" to what the other party is saying, why they may retract their earlier views, and why they may try having the other retract. However, the rationality of that aspect of their practice, if one adopts MacFarlane's semantics, is only apparent. For it was also an initial datum of that practice that each party is making an accurate judgment from their own perspective. So, with what right does one assess it from one's own position? Furthermore, doing so has an effect on the dispute, for it trumps the perspective that returned an opposite verdict on the matter at issue by making it seem incorrect, even from that perspective. . . (81)

I don't know if I fully understand this charge. But it seems to me that the arguments supporting it rest on two mistakes.

The first is a failure to keep in mind the distinction between disagreement in the

activity sense and disagreement in the state sense. I say “keep in mind,” because they are aware of this distinction, but they do not make use of it when they should. 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 this underestimates 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 the other party is wrong; we’re not at all inclined to say, “Yes, 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 whether there is human-caused climate change with my Trumpist neighbor doesn’t mean we no longer disagree. It just means that we no longer see much point in engaging in further argument.

We should be suspicious, then, of any argument from the irrationality of continued disputes to the irrationality of my sort of relativism.<sup>4</sup> Here’s another instance of the slide, 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 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

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<sup>4</sup>Not that there aren’t interesting questions about the rationality of assessment sensitivity; I wrote a whole chapter of my book discussing these, but B&C do not engage with it.

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” does not imply “no point in going on disagreeing” (in the state sense).

The second mistake in B&C’s thinking concerns what they call Equal Validity. This is one of their “essential features” of relativism. Of course, as they acknowledge, many relativists have explicitly disavowed it (see for example Kusch 2019; also MacFarlane 2014, sec. 7.1.3). I’m prepared to believe that some suitably weak and vague formulation of Equal Validity might apply throughout the big tent. But when they criticize my view for failing to vindicate Equal Validity, they seem to have something extremely strong in mind.

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)

This charge is puzzling. On my view there certainly *is* a sense in which each opposing party can recognize that the other party is entitled to their view. Both parties can recognize that, given the norms for assertion and retraction, the other party 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 their present context). These facts about the correctness of particular acts of assertion or retraction are non-epistemic—an assertion can be correct in this sense even without being epistemically warranted—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>5</sup>

Perhaps what is behind B&C's puzzling charge that the two parties in my relativist practice assess the truth or accuracy of each others' claims "absolutely" is that they express their rejection of the others' view using the monadic predicates "false" and "inaccurate." But let's not conflate monadicity and absoluteness. The statement "*p* is inaccurate" does not commit the speaker to the *absolute* inaccuracy of *p*, on my view, because the monadic predicate "inaccurate" is assessment-sensitive. Asserting that *p* is inaccurate is, in fact, perfectly compatible with asserting that *p* is accurate as assessed from someone else's context.

So I think there's 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' judgments. They may hold that if you take another's tastes or standards to lead them systematically to make judgments that are inaccurate, by your lights, then *ipso facto* you don't 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 can't 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. That may seem to leave open the possibility that relativism is a position that reveals apparent disagreements to be merely apparent. But, as I noted with surprise at the outset, contextualist views that do exactly this were deemed non-relativist from the start.

So, according to B&C, I can't get into the relativist tent because I don't respect Equal Validity. And Protagoras can't get in because he *does* respect it. Who do you have to know to become a member?

## References

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<sup>5</sup>I hope nobody will think it a scandal that I acknowledge different senses of correctness. Even the most hardened antirealist 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.



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