

# Can we really make sense of relative truth?

[name suppressed for blind review]

According to a very basic and, I think, ultimately correct understanding of truth and disagreement, it is an a priori truth that for any case of real disagreement, at least one of the involved disputants must be making a *mistake* in judgment. If we conceive of a basic disagreement just as a situation where one person claims that  $p$  and the other claims that  $\sim p$ <sup>1</sup>, given that elementary logic precludes it from being the case both that  $p$  and that  $\sim p$ , it seems that at least one of the involved disputants must be failing to speak truly. In other words, according to this familiar picture, it cannot be the case that the two disputants involved in a given disagreement are “both right.”

## i. Disagreement and matters of taste

At least when applied to certain classes of disagreements, rejecting the possibility of mutual truth strikes most of us as uncontroversial. When it comes to disagreements over things like whether there are three chairs in the living room, for example, insofar as two persons make genuinely contrary claims about the matter, it seems impossible that both might manage to speak truly.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to these prosaic sorts of cases, however, there are types of disagreements where there is at least some apprehension towards denying the possibility of mutual truth. Consider a situation where you and I are arguing over whether the *avant garde* comedian Andy Kaufman was hilarious. Suppose I say to you, “Andy Kaufman was hilarious, a true comic genius.” You reply, standoffishly, “Genius? The man just made his audience feel awkward and uncomfortable most of the time. He wasn’t funny at all.” For purposes of discussion, let us interpret my claim as entailing that Andy Kaufman was hilarious ( $p$ ), and yours as entailing that Andy Kaufman was not hilarious ( $\sim p$ ).<sup>3 4</sup> At least at first blush, this exchange strikes us as a case of real disagreement. You and I

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, most ordinary cases of disagreement diverge from this basic form, involving instead the affirmation of *prima facie* distinct theses, rather than the explicit affirmation and denial of the same thesis (e.g. Tim: “Eric, don’t forget, the meeting is on Tuesday.” Eric: “No, the meeting is on Wednesday, you dolt.”). Still, because these ordinary cases count as real disagreements only insofar as the two competing claims entail the other’s negation (e.g. the meeting’s being on Wednesday precludes its being on Tuesday, and vice versa), it seems fair to go to the  $p$  versus  $\sim p$  model straightaway.

<sup>2</sup> One possible exception would be disputes owed to vagueness. Though I doubt that such cases actually represent an exception to the general rule against mutual truth, for purposes of this discussion I will simply set them to the side.

<sup>3</sup> While it may strike the reader as unnecessarily circuitous to translate a stipulated example and not to go to the  $p$  v.  $\sim p$  structure straightaway, I think there to be good methodological reasons not to do so. Far too many of the discussions of true relativism present conversations within discourse about matters of taste as having roughly the following form: one person asserts boldly to the other “ $X$  is hilarious/beautiful/delicious/etc.,” and the other responds while equal

appear to have made genuinely contradictory claims, and, perhaps more importantly, our attitudes towards one another reflect that (e.g. you think that I am *wrong* to think that Andy Kaufman was hilarious, and I understand your response as a direct *challenge* to the legitimacy of my claim). At the same time, in this case it might seem implausible to think of it as an a priori matter that at least one of us must be making a *mistake* in comedic judgment. Given his eccentric brand of humor, one might take it to be simply a “matter of taste” as to whether one (rightly) judges Andy Kaufman to be hilarious, and that one would not be in any way criticizable for holding either view on the matter.

If we do think that it is simply a matter of personal discretion as to whether one (rightly) appreciates Kaufman’s humor, however, then this immediately gives rise to the question of how we ought to understand the *prima facie* disagreement under consideration. After all, if when I judge that Andy Kaufman was hilarious the correctness of that judgment hinges just on whether Kaufman’s humor was a good fit with *my* comedic sensibilities, and if when you judge that Andy Kaufman was decidedly unfunny the correctness of that judgment hinges just on whether Kaufman’s humor was an ill fit with *your* comedic sensibilities, then, assuming that you and I have suitably *different* comedic sensibilities, there seems to be no reason why our two judgments could not both turn out to be correct. In other words, there seems to be nothing preventing this from being a situation where we have both managed to speak truly.

## ii. Moderate relativism

One familiar strategy for making sense of what appears to be the mutual truth of our *prima facie* competing claims is by explaining away the *prima facie* competition. To give it a name, let us call this general approach *moderate relativism*. For example, suppose that when affirming Kaufman’s talents, what I am really saying is (perhaps unwittingly) something like “Andy Kaufman was hilarious (according to *my* idiosyncratic sense of humor),” and likewise that when you denounce Kaufman what you are really saying (again, perhaps unwittingly) is something like “Andy Kaufman wasn’t funny at all (according to *my* idiosyncratic sense of humor).” With our respective claims so construed, assuming that the two of us have suitably *differing* senses of humor, it seems clear that

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confidence “X is *not* hilarious/beautiful/delicious/etc.” Neither offers anything like a justification or explanation of why they hold the (firm) view that they do. Of course, anyone who has ever engaged in a reasonably sophisticated discussion about such things will recognize the stilted nature of such reconstructions. However, given the pervasiveness of such reconstructions in philosophical discussion, I think it worth reminding the reader of their stilted nature.

<sup>4</sup> Here and throughout I assume, contra the expressivist, that we do best to respect the *prima facie* assertoric character of statements of this sort.

there is no a priori reason for thinking that we might not have both managed to speak truly in this case.

So, at least in terms of facilitating the possibility of mutual truth, a moderate relativist approach of this sort looks promising. By construing our respective evaluations of Kaufman's comedic abilities as addressed in some way or other to our own idiosyncratic standards of correctness (e.g. our idiosyncratic senses of humor) the moderate relativist seems perfectly capable of explaining why it would be correct to think of it as simply a "matter of taste" as to whether one of us (rightly) regards Andy Kaufman as having been hilarious.

Unfortunately, precisely because she construes our respective evaluations as addressed to distinct standards of correctness, the moderate relativist thus seems to find herself incapable of respecting our shared sense that the exchange we are having amounts to a real disagreement. If the correctness of my claim that Andy Kaufman was hilarious hinges just on whether Kaufman's humor is a good fit with *my* comedic sensibilities and the correctness of your claim that Kaufman wasn't funny at all hinges just on whether his humor was an ill-fit with *your* comedic sensibilities, then our exchange seems to amount to no more of a disagreement than a situation where I say to you, "I really like Andy Kaufman's comedy," and you respond, "Well, I don't like his comedy at all."<sup>5</sup>

Now, as Keith DeRose and others have argued, there are various maneuvers available to the moderate relativist that allow her to bring disagreement back into the picture, at least to a certain extent.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, for each and every case where the moderate relativist does manage to use these tools in order to facilitate real disagreement, she simultaneously undoes the possibility of mutual truth in that case.<sup>7</sup> After all, according to these more sophisticated moderate relativist accounts, insofar as we do manage to engage in a real disagreement over whether Andy Kaufman was hilarious, which of us (if either) manages to speak truly will depend just on whether it is (objectively) correct to ascribe hilariousness to Kaufman in the given conversational context (e.g. if the context is such that my comedic standards are the ones governing the conversation, then I will

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<sup>5</sup> We may still wish to characterize a situation like this as a sort of *practical* disagreement.

<sup>6</sup> DeRose, "Single Scoreboard Semantics." See also Egan, "De Gustibus Non Disputandum Est (At Least, Not Always)" for a clever strategy for reviving disagreement in some cases within something like a response-dependency framework. See MacFarlane, "Relativism and Disagreement," for some legitimate worries over how far this particular strategy can get us (pp. 4-7).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. If my utterance "Andy Kaufman is hilarious" expresses the claim that, say, Andy Kaufman is hilarious relative to *our* idiosyncratic senses of humor and your utterance "Andy Kaufman isn't funny at all" expresses the claim that Andy Kaufman isn't funny at all relative to *our* idiosyncratic senses of humor (this is roughly the account suggested by Egan), then at least one of us has to be wrong.

speak truly and you falsely). And, again, at most one of us will have spoken correctly, and the basic account of truth and disagreement mentioned at the outset will be preserved.

### iii. True relativism

Faced with the observation that the general ban on mistake-free disagreements holds good even for the moderate relativist, John MacFarlane makes the following remark:

One might now despair of ever getting [mutual truth] and disagreement into the same picture. Perhaps we just have to choose. This is where the [true] relativist comes in with her seductive song. “You can have it both ways,” she says, “if you just accept that propositions about the funny [and] the delicious... have truth values only relative to a person or perspective. When I say that apples are delicious and you deny this, you are denying the very same proposition that I am asserting. We genuinely disagree. Yet this proposition may be true for you but false for me.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, what MacFarlane’s *true relativist* promises is an account that successfully mixes what have up till now seemed to be oil and water by preserving the character of disputes like ours concerning Andy Kaufman as real disagreements while at the same time facilitating the possibility that the involved disputants might both manage, at least in some sense, to speak truly.

So how is this supposed to work? The true relativist tries to achieve this end by characterizing ascriptions of comedic merit as governed by what MacFarlane calls an “assessment-relative” standard of correctness.<sup>9</sup> Whereas an ordinary, absolute standard of correctness yields the same results no matter who it is that (correctly) applies it, such that if some claim is correctly judged to be “true” according to that standard, that result holds good for everyone (indeed, that these standards function in this way seems to be just what makes them *standards*), an assessment-relative standard can, at least in principle, yield different results for different assessors, such that the very same claim might be (correctly) judged “true” by one assessor while at the same time is (correctly) judged “false” by another. For example, a true relativist about comedy might argue that whether my earlier claim, “Andy Kaufman was hilarious,” is to count as correct for a particular assessor will depend largely on facts about *her*. In particular, whether my claim will count as correct *for her* will hinge mostly on whether Kaufman’s humor is a good fit with *her* comedic sensibilities. Correspondingly, as sensibilities vary from assessor to assessor, the truth-value of my claim will vary in turn. Given that Andy Kaufman’s humor plays very well relative to my comedic sensibilities,

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<sup>8</sup> MacFarlane, “Relativism and Disagreement,” pp. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> MacFarlane, “Making Sense of Relative Truth.”

when I am the one assessing my own claim, that claim will turn out to be unambiguously true (*for me*), though that very same claim will prove decidedly false (*for you*) when you are the one doing the assessing (assuming that your comedic sensibilities are sufficiently dissimilar). Thus, insofar as our comedic sensibilities diverge, what *counts as* hilarious from my “perspective”<sup>10</sup> will differ accordingly from what *counts as* hilarious from yours.

With this tool of assessment-relative standards of correctness in hand, the true relativist looks to be in a good position to secure both real disagreement and mutual truth when analyzing our earlier two person dispute. When I say to you, “Andy Kaufman was hilarious,” and you respond, “Andy Kaufman wasn’t funny at all,” the true relativist is at perfect liberty to characterize our dispute as one over whether Andy Kaufman was hilarious *simpliciter*, i.e. he can maintain that we are each making perfectly general claims about Kaufman’s talents, as opposed to claims that are surreptitiously indexed to different, idiosyncratic standards of hilariousness. At the same time, the true relativist can maintain that, at least in some sense, we might both be managing to speak the truth. The way the true relativist tries to make sense of this is by allowing that when I am the one who is assessing the situation, my comedic sensibilities become the standard against which each claim is to be measured, thus rendering my claim true and your claim false (*for me*). Conversely, when you are the one doing the assessing, your comedic sensibilities become the relevant standard,<sup>11</sup> and the truth-values of the two claims are reversed (*for you*). Thus, despite the fact that we have managed to affirm genuinely contradictory claims, it can still turn out that we have both succeeded, from our respective standpoints, in speaking truly.

#### iv. Disagreement

Again, much of the motivation for the true relativist’s account is grounded in its alleged ability to facilitate real disagreement within discourses that strike us as having to do with a “subjective” or “relativistic” subject matter. As we’ve already seen, however, in order to facilitate disagreement while still preserving the “subjectivity” or “relativity” of judgments about matters of taste, the true relativist must take the somewhat radical step of rejecting the basic account of disagreement sketched at the outset. Again, according to that account it cannot be the case that some real disagreement involves two disputants who both manage to speak truly in asserting their contrary

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<sup>10</sup> Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*.

<sup>11</sup> Crucial to remember here is that although the two of us are, in effect, appealing to different comedic standards, the true relativist still regards us as adhering to the *same* (assessment-relative) standards of correctness.

claims. Having departed so dramatically from what I take it is our ordinary understanding of the notion, one may begin to worry that the conception of disagreement that the true relativist is left with is, at best, a distant cousin of the conception that most of us adhere to. In particular, one begins to worry that the true relativist's account is somewhat at odds with what we might call the *basic logic of disagreement*.

Consider a basic disagreement where I claim that  $p$  and you claim that  $\sim p$ . In this situation, both of us are, just in virtue of our engaging in a disagreement, (consciously) subject to a variety of demands. For example, because I take it to be the case that  $p$ , basic consistency demands that I not also take it to be the case that  $\sim p$ . Taken in conjunction with my understanding of truth as agreement with whatever is the case (the Disquotational Schema), my belief that  $p$  requires in turn that I regard any belief or claim to the effect that  $p$  as true and any belief or claim to the effect that  $\sim p$  as false. And, assuming that we understand truth as a norm governing both belief and assertion,<sup>12</sup> my judging it to be the case that  $p$  also requires that I regard those who agree with me as having judged things correctly and those who disagree with me as being *mistaken*. More colloquially, my thinking that I am *right* about some issue requires my thinking of those who are in disagreement with me as being *wrong*.<sup>13</sup>

Further still, insofar as I think of those like you who disagree with me on the matter in dispute as being wrong or mistaken, this in turn commits me to viewing you and your kind as having good reason<sup>14</sup> to revise your cognitive attitudes on the matter so as to bring them into alignment with my own. And conversely, because I regard my own view on the matter as correct, I see myself as having good reason to do just the opposite, namely to persist in the attitudes that I already have.

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<sup>12</sup> Though certainly not the only norm. If we understand knowledge as a norm governing assertion, for example, cases will certainly arise where it would be incorrect to assert that  $p$  even if it is the case that  $p$  insofar as one lacks adequate justification for believing that  $p$ . The important thing here, however, is that it can never be correct in the fullest sense to assert something untrue, even in situations where one could be *warranted* in doing so (e.g. situations where, given the available information, the most reasonable thing to assert is something false). In other words, I take it that for any reasonable account of assertion, truth is going to be a necessary albeit insufficient condition for correctness.

<sup>13</sup> Wright rejects this basic intuition in "Rhubarb," arguing that for disagreements over matters of taste the "ordinary view" is that each disputant regards herself as genuinely disagreeing with the other person, but as at the same time holding that it may be the case that they are "both right" (though, again, he seems to have since softened somewhat on this claim). Here I just have to put my foot down and say that this "ordinary view" is at odds with our most basic understanding of what disagreeing with someone amounts to. I am not sure what would constitute better evidence that someone failed to grasp the concept of disagreement than their willingness to assert, "I disagree, but you are right."

<sup>14</sup> Here and throughout I use the notion of "good reason" in the objective sense. This is as opposed to the subjective sense of "good reason," according to which an agent has good reason to believe that  $p$  iff demands of consistency require her to believe that  $p$  given what evidence is available to her at the time, what other things she takes to be the case, etc. For more on the distinction between objective and subjective reasons for belief, see Kolodny's "Why Be Rational?"

My thinking that you are wrong not to think that  $p$  requires me, on pains of inconsistency, to think that you ought to come to think that  $p$ .<sup>15</sup> And correspondingly, my thinking that I am right in taking it to be the case that  $p$  involves my also thinking that I ought to persist in that belief.<sup>16</sup>

Again, this all seems to be part of the basic logic of disagreement *in general*. Whether we are arguing about how many chairs there are in the living room or whether Nantucket Bay scallops are delicious, insofar as two persons take themselves to have genuinely contrary views on some matter, i.e. insofar as two people take themselves to be involved in a real disagreement, neither of those individuals can, on pains of serious irrationality, think that both they and their interlocutor speak truly. This is why a statement such as “Nantucket Bay scallops are delicious, but you are right, they are quite disgusting” strikes us as blatantly inconsistent.

To a certain extent, the true relativist’s account of discourse about “matters of taste” does manage to accommodate this general understanding of the basic logic of disagreement. On the true relativist’s model, if, *from my perspective*, I regard the claim “Nantucket Bay scallops are delicious” as being true, I am simultaneously obliged to regard all claims to the contrary as mistaken. If you were to come along and say to me, “Nantucket Bay scallops are absolutely disgusting,” in virtue of my occupying the perspective that I do, I would be obliged to think of that claim as being determinately false. Thus, the true relativist manages to avoid blatant contradiction by precluding the possibility of two contrary claims both coming out true when assessed from the same point of view. It cannot be the case, even for the true relativist, that both  $p$  and  $\sim p$  are true from a singular standpoint. As we saw earlier, however, unlike the naïve absolutist who thinks of all truth as absolute, the true relativist wants to claim that while it may be the case that my claim “Nantucket Bay scallops are delicious” and your claim “Nantucket Bay scallops are absolutely disgusting” are, *from my perspective*, true and false respectively, *from your perspective* precisely the converse will hold. According to the true relativist, while each of us can (rightly) regard her own claim as correct from her respective standpoint, each of us can also (rightly) regard the other’s claim as being incorrect.

That possibility seems to put us in a bit of an odd situation when it comes to our attitudes towards the norms governing assertion and belief revision. Because your contention that Nantucket

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, with this requirement and the rest, one might almost regard them as constitutive requirements, such that if one failed to accept these demands, she could not properly be ascribed an understanding of the notions of truth and disagreement at all. That is why I think it right to understand these rules as making up the *basic* logic of disagreement.

<sup>16</sup> Again, “ought” in the sense that we think that one ought to hold true beliefs. Admittedly, there will be cases where we might cede that, all things considered, one “ought,” pragmatically speaking, to persist in holding a false belief (e.g. in situations where coming to hold the true belief would require more effort than it’s worth), but that is a different sort of “ought” than we are concerned with here.

Bay scallops are disgusting is decidedly false *for me*, I am rationally required to think of you as having spoken in error, and, in turn, to view you as being obliged to revise your attitude on the matter. I am right and you are wrong, so you should think what I think. At the same time, at least insofar as it is possible for me to become aware of the assessment-relative nature of truth about the delicious, I ought also to be able to recognize that what you have said might be and probably is actually true *for you*, in which case I should also see that, *from your perspective*, you probably have no obligation to revise whatsoever. In fact, in such a situation it seems that I ought to be able to see that, *from your perspective*, it would likely be a *mistake* for you to bring your beliefs into conformity with mine, since that would amount to bringing yourself to accept a claim which is, *for you*, decidedly false. Perhaps even more unsettlingly, I should also recognize that, *from your perspective*, it very well may be the case that I am the one who is actually under normative pressure to revise his attitudes. Relative to your context of assessment, you think of me as having spoken in error and, moreover, *you are probably right*.<sup>17</sup>

Now, as confusing as this all might sound, if the relativist's story was told in the form "From my perspective, it *seems* to be the case that..." and "From your perspective, by contrast, it *seems* to be the case that..." then there would be nothing especially puzzling going on. Quite to the contrary, that is often just how things go in cases of unresolved disagreement: both disputants think that they are right and that the other person is wrong and, in turn, that the other person is the one under an all things considered obligation to revise her attitudes. Further still, ordinary disagreements also permit of an analogue to the second-order judgment about how things actually are for the other person in that each of us can form an opinion about *why* things seem one way to you and another way to me (e.g. I might realize that you are failing to appreciate some salient piece of evidence, and you might think yourself to have identified some source of bias in my judgment). Again, this is all commonplace. The puzzling thing about the relativist's picture is, then, that this is not only how things *seem* to each disputant, but potentially how they actually *are* for them.

Again, the point of all of this is just to emphasize how disparate this characterization of the felt normative pressures to revise/preserve our attitudes is in comparison with our everyday experience of such pressures when engaging in the sorts of conversational exchanges that we are interested in. When you and I disagree over whether a particular food is delicious or whether some

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<sup>17</sup> Note that this revelation does nothing to undermine my original judgment that, from my perspective, I am right and you are wrong.



joke is hilarious, we both think ourselves to be right and the other to be wrong, and neither of us seems to think that, *in some other sense*, the other is right and we are the one who is wrong. In ordinary conversation, because I think that Andy Kaufman was hilarious, insofar as you maintain otherwise, I think that you are *wrong*, and that, it seems, is that.

#### **v. Good reasons and reflective endorsement**

To make clear, to call the true relativist's account of disagreement unfamiliar (and puzzling) is not to say that it is incoherent. In the scenario just described, the relativist's account does not embroil either you or I in anything like a straightforward contradiction. Although each of us regards the other as being in some sense obliged to both revise and to persist in her belief, because those obligations are themselves to be understood as holding good only relative to differing perspectives, neither obligation directly contradicts the other. At the same time, insofar as we are both aware of the perspectival nature of those obligations, it becomes a bit difficult to understand the sense in which we think that the other "ought" to align her attitudes with our own. After all, ordinarily when I judge that you "ought" to come to believe that *p*, I also think it should be possible, at least in principle, to get you to see that *p* by means of discussion, presentation of evidence, etc. Insofar as I actually have good reasons for thinking that *p*, it seems that I ought to be able to *share* those good reasons with you as a means of bringing you to align your attitudes with my own, or, at the very least, to get you to consider doing so. According to the true relativist's account, by contrast, although I do in some sense rightly take myself to have citable good reasons for believing that *p*, I ought also to realize that in certain situations those things that I regard as good reasons for believing that *p* will not, barring deception, actually strike you as such. Although I may have access to pieces of evidence that I in some sense rightly regard as constituting a demonstrative proof of *p*, I should simultaneously recognize that there may be circumstances in which this 'proof' will (in some sense rightly) be met by you with no more than a shrug.

What I am trying to illustrate here is that, as we ordinarily understand them, things such as good reasons, evidence, proofs, etc. are a sort of common currency that we can use in conversational exchanges in order to foster, or at least work towards, a shared understanding of whatever it is that we are talking about. Good reasons *et al.* are the things that we use to demonstrate not only to ourselves but also to others why it is that we ought to think of the world in one way rather than another. That said, according to the true relativist's account, within the domain

of matters of taste, good reasons *et al.* are, at least in a number of cases, stripped of this usefulness, left to serve as little more than a source of self-justification in situations where we are *certain* that we are in the right despite the fact that there is *nothing* that we could possibly say to (rationally) shake the confidence of the person with whom we disagree. Thus, just as we have worried all along about assessment-relative truth's status as a recognizable conception of truth, here it seems at least worth pondering whether assessment-relative good reasons *et al.*, given their potentially ineffectual nature, are actually recognizable *as* good reasons *et al.* in the ordinary sense. Another way framing the question is to ask, Is an assessment-relative standard of warrant recognizable as a genuine standard of warrant?

As I suggested in the last section, the true relativist's account of truth, disagreement, and the rest seems, at the very least, to be seriously at odds with our ordinary understanding of what goes on when you and I engage in conversational exchanges concerning questions of comedic merit and the like. As such, I take it that explicit recognition of the assessment-relative nature of the standards of both warrant and correctness, governing our conversations would come as something of a revelation. Again, this by itself needn't be considered a serious strike against the true relativist's account. Perhaps, irrespective of what we *think* that we are doing when we engage in discussions of comedy, what we are *actually* doing is adhering to something like assessment-relative standards of correctness and warrant. This is where it seems relevant to ask whether such a practice would be *reflectively endorsable*. In asking whether a discourse employing such assessment-relative standards would admit of reflective endorsement, what we are asking is whether we would find this a reasonable practice to continue to engage in having realized what was really going on.<sup>18</sup> Would we, as Wright suggested at one point, simply allow that this is just how truth and warrant function in discourse about the comic, suggesting that an assessment-relative standard of warrant really is perfectly recognizable as a genuine standard of warrant, and, in turn, that assessment-relative truth really is perfectly recognizable as a conception of truth?<sup>19</sup> Or would we, by contrast, regard the practice in question as deeply flawed and in need of serious revision?

At this point, my hope is that this question will strike the reader as largely rhetorical. Given the potentially ineffectual nature of the good reasons, evidence, proofs, etc. that we make use of as participants within an assessment-relativized discourse, it is a bit hard to fathom how speakers could

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<sup>18</sup> Another way of putting the question would be to ask whether, once we realized what we were actually doing when engaging in these discussions, we would continue to think of that practice as actually "making sense."

<sup>19</sup> Wright, "Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism, and Rhubarb," amongst others.

reasonably press forward with such a practice upon being made aware of its potential for ineffectuality. Why would I want to engage in a discourse that makes space for, say, a situation in which I might be in possession of what is, for me, perfectly compelling evidence that Andy Kaufman was hilarious, but where, at the same time, my presenting you with this evidence would do nothing to get you to (rationally) back down from your opposing view? Likewise, why would I want to engage in a practice that made space for a situation where I can present you with what is, by my lights, perfectly compelling evidence of the deliciousness of Nantucket Bay scallops, but where you will, insofar as you are rational, continue to turn your nose up at them in disgust?

Admittedly, I may, post-revelation, reasonably wish to press forward in a very *similar* sort of practice. For example, because the things I treat as evidence of Kaufman's hilariousness would be treated as evidence by, and hence could be used to alter the attitudes of, those with sufficiently similar comedic sensibilities (e.g. I might change a person's mind about Kaufman if she has similar comedic sensibilities to mine, but has failed to notice some of the nuances that made Kaufman's work so brilliant), it seems that it would make quite a lot of sense for me to discuss these and similar matters with such likeminded individuals. However, as a means of minimizing frustration, it seems that I would also want to structure this revised discourse about the comic so as to allow me to opt out of exchanges with individuals with whom I failed to share comedic sensibilities. Probably the simplest way of achieving this end would be to adopt one of the more sophisticated forms of moderate relativism about comedy mentioned earlier, as going that route would allow participants within the revised discourse to withdraw from *prima facie* disagreements in cases where we realize that our interlocutor has sufficiently different comedic sensibilities. In the revised version of our dispute concerning Andy Kaufman, for example, insofar as I come to realize that, owed to differences in our respective comedic sensibilities, there is simply no way to bring you to recognize Kaufman's talents,<sup>20</sup> I could simply say to you, "Look, we clearly have different senses of humor. We're just talking past one another here." Given the differences in our respective standards for determining whether someone is to *count as* hilarious, a moderately relativistic discourse about the comic would allow me to treat this as a case where the appearance of disagreement rests on a false

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<sup>20</sup> Note that this would take some time. One could not conclude from the mere fact that you form a contrary judgment on the matter that you have sufficiently dissimilar sensibilities to warrant my opting out of the conversation (e.g. maybe we have similar sensibilities, but you have only seen a limited number of Kaufman's performances, none of which were especially good). Rather, my opting out would only be warranted after it became apparent that none of the things that I was citing as evidence in favor of my position struck you as such.

presupposition on the part of both disputants that they have relevantly similar senses of humor.<sup>21</sup> As such, once the falsity of our presupposition is brought to light, and could recognize that, strictly speaking, there is no real disagreement between us.<sup>22, 23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This seems to be roughly what Andy Egan has in mind with his account of matters of taste in his “De Gustibus Non Disputandum Est (at Least, Not Always).”

<sup>22</sup> Though practical disagreement may still persist.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly enough, in his “Relativism and Disagreement” MacFarlane actually considers a worry much like the one raised in this section, but sets it aside rather quickly. “[Relativized] expressions,” he says, “are designed, it seems, to foster controversy, where [non-relative] expressions preclude it. But what is the point of fostering controversy in ‘subjective’ domains, if there is no (non-relative) truth on which both parties can converge? Why shouldn’t we just talk about our own tastes, rather than ascribing subjective properties to objects?” (“Relativism and Disagreement,” p. 21). MacFarlane’s response to this question is that a disagreement permitting relativistic discourse provides pressure for us to “coordinate” our individual standards in a way that discourse about our subjective preferences does not. Unfortunately, it is rather unclear how this is supposed to work. As saw in the previous section, the relativized discourse allows for us to hold genuinely contrary views without either of us being under any rational obligation (when viewing things from our respective standpoints) to revise our attitudes. Take the example of a dispute over whether some particular sunset is beautiful. Even if it is true from your perspective that the sunset is not especially beautiful, this gives me no reason to “coordinate” my attitudes with yours, assuming that my contrary belief is correct when viewed from my perspective. Of course, there may be other, practical advantages to be had if we both came to have the same attitude towards the sunset (e.g. it would make it easier to decide whether to spend time in the future looking at sunsets), which would give us at least some reason to coordinate. However, such practical motivations to coordinate would be equally present even if we had restricted ourselves to talk of what each of us enjoys. In most cases, it is, after all, much easier to plan joint activities when both parties enjoy the same things. The question thus remains as to what additional motivation to coordinate a relativized discourse about the enjoyable is supposed to add over and above this sort of practical motivation. MacFarlane suggests, citing Gibbard, that there is perhaps some added impetus to coordinate given the inherent “uncomfortableness” of being in a state of disagreement (*ibid.*, pp. 21-2). However, given that reflection should reveal to both of us that any felt additional pressure to revise our attitudes over and above that provided by pragmatic considerations is actually groundless, this response seems somewhat less than satisfying. If we are prone to revise our attitudes about what is funny or unfunny based on conversation, wouldn’t we like to think that this proneness is due to something other than some deep-seated irrationality?