·Relative Correctness

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Abstract

John MacFarlane has defended a radical form of truth relativism, making the truth of assertions relative not only to contexts of utterance but also to contexts of assessment, or perspectives. Making sense of assessment-sensitive truth is a matter of making sense of the normative commitments undertaken by speakers in using assessment-sensitive sentences. This paper argues against the possibility of making sense of such a practice, offering a variation of Evans's (1985) challenge to the coherence of relative truth. The main objection to the relativist is that rational and earnest speakers are not bound by assessment-relative standards of correctness.

Introduction

John MacFarlane has offered a well-sustained defense of truth relativism in recent years.[1] In making the truth of assertions relative to contexts of assessment, his proposal goes beyond the standard relativization of utterance truth to contexts of utterance and circumstances of evaluation. But making sense of assessment-sensitive truth, as he stresses, is a matter of making sense of the normative constraints and commitments undertaken by speakers in using assessment-sensitive sentences.

The main challenge to MacFarlane's version of relativism is whether it yields a rational practice of assertion. The challenge is raised by Evans (1985). Adapting Evans's objection, I argue here that assessment-relative truth cannot meet what I take to be the core of the challenge. Elaborated in the way I suggest, the challenge can be raised also against

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[1] I focus exclusively on MacFarlane's proposal because he offers, in my view, the clearest and strongest account of the pragmatics of the use of assessment-relative propositions See MacFarlane (2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, ms).

MacFarlane's account of assertion. An asserter is under no obligation to undertake a commitment to retract an assertion and admit it was incorrect when challenged by someone who does not share the same perspective. As I claim, this holds even when the challenger is the asserter herself in the future. Earnest rational speakers can only be bound to undertake commitments determined at the context of assessment that is fixed at the context of utterance. There is hence no normative difference between assessment-relativism and contextualism (indexical or not). The only obligations speakers can be expected to comply with are those determined by the context of utterance. This means that the correctness of assertions is not relative.

The first section presents MacFarlane's position on assessment-relativism. The second section presents Evans's challenge to the relativization and MacFarlane's response. In the final section, I explain how this account of assertion fails to meet a variation on Evans's challenge.

1. *Assessment-Relative Truth and Relative Correctness*

Imagine two opera experts, Smith and Jones, both equally qualified, who agree on the following characterization of Maria Callas's voice:

(1) The voice of Callas is metallic, uneven, sometimes nasal, strident and unsteady with the high notes; it is harsh and often unpleasant.

Our experts agree over the thick evaluative predicates ascribed to Callas's voice, even if some of the descriptions are metaphorical. The experts do not agree, however, on whether Callas was one of the best (opera) singers of the 20th century, because they do not even agree on (2) and (3):

(2) Callas is good (as an opera singer).

(3) Renata Tebaldi is better than Callas.

Even though, again, they agree that

(4) Tebaldi has a classical, harmonious, even voice, delivering clean and technically perfect interpretations.

It is conceivable that our experts, Smith and Jones, go on forever about the right answer to the question of who is the better singer, without reaching any agreement. The supporter of Callas, Smith, will draw attention to the fact that all the flaws that can be attributed to her voice are largely irrelevant to an assessment of her interpretations. The opponent of Callas, Jones, will draw attention to the impossibility of enjoying interpretations made with a strident harsh metallic voice. The dispute exemplifies a common aesthetic disagreement. Once all the fine-grained descriptions are given, disagreement often remains between operatic experts as to whether x is good, or whether x is better than y.

The choice of the example is not gratuitous. If relativism about evaluative predicates is well motivated, it should be possible that two people who are experts on a given topic, knowing all the objective properties in that range of issues, agreeing over very fine-grained descriptions, insist nonetheless on their own views on evaluations made at a certain level. Moreover, it should be possible that there is no response-independent answer forthcoming, and, given this, that neither expert can be expected to abandon her view. An expert's view reflects an aesthetic standard that she masters, and, it is assumed, no such perspective is more veridical than another.

An explanation for this sort of deadlock disagreement over matters of aesthetic taste makes (2) context-dependent. Making utterances of (2) context-dependent can account for the sense in which neither Smith nor Jones are at fault. Smith says that Callas is good for the standard at Smith's context of utterance, and Jones denies that Callas is good for the standard at Jones's context of utterance. Yet, the ground for disagreement over content is lost. Context-dependence, on the standard assumptions convincingly based on data about 'here' and 'now',

simply generates different semantic contents, and as a result the corresponding diagnosis for the present case would be that Smith and Jones are talking past each other.

The description of the case appeals to our (arguably) shared intuition that contenders in these disputes are doing more than talking past each other. In the current debate about the meaning of predicates of personal taste and evaluative predicates, epistemic modals and knowledge attributions, several authors have raised objections against contextualist approaches, mainly on the basis that contextualism misses intuitions of disagreement that these writers show we have. The problem, as they argue, is that of lost disagreement. Thus, Kölbel (2004) argues on this basis for what is usually called 'moderate truth-relativism' (also known as 'non-indexical contextualism', by contrast with the more standard contextualist views).

The moderate relativist wants to explain disagreement by making speakers assert/deny the same proposition and placing the required standard of aesthetic taste in the circumstances of evaluation.[2] The view is non-indexical because the parameters required for the evaluation of a sentence are not required or triggered by the character of an expression in the sentence uttered; henceforth those parameters are not ingredients of content. This form of relativism is moderate because the relevant parameters in the circumstances of evaluation are settled at the context of utterance. Speakers, in asserting, aim at partially characterizing particular circumstances, and those are the relevant ones for assessing their assertions.

Egan (2007, 2010), Lasersohn (2005) and MacFarlane (2003, 2005, 2007, 2008 and MS) have argued for another version that can be called 'assessment-relativism'. MacFarlane's form of truth relativism challenges the moderate constraint on what settles parameters, dropping this restriction. Genuinely relativistic truth is relativized to parameters (times,

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[2] I agree with the arguments given by MacFarlane (2007, p. 23), García-Carpintero (2008, pp. 139-41) and Francén (2010) to the effect that non-indexical contextualism only captures the apparent lack of objectivity of statements in the areas of discourse earlier considered at the cost of failing to capture any *relevant* sense of doxastic disagreement. For more about this problem, see Marques (forthcoming).

perspectives, standards of taste, aesthetic standards, etc.) that need not be settled in the context of utterance, and, hence, may be beyond what can be aimed or intended by a speaker.

MacFarlane claims that the truth of certain types of utterances is relative to contexts of assessment:

> By a 'context of assessment', I mean simply a concrete situation in which a use of a sentence is being assessed. We perform speech acts, but we also assess them; so, just as we can talk of the context in which a sentence is being used, we can talk of a context (there will be indefinitely many) in which a use of it is being assessed. (MacFarlane (2005), p. 325)

Whereas for the non-indexical contextualist an utterance of a sentence is evaluated *with respect to parameters that are fixed at the context of utterance*, for MacFarlane an utterance of some kind of sentences is evaluated *with respect to parameters that need not be settled at the context of utterance*. And this is the fundamental difference between non-indexical contextualism and truth-relativism.

Here, I am concerned with the rationality of engaging in a practice of assertion described by means of this form of theoretical framework, and not with discussing whether particular forms of discourse would fit it or not. Hence, I will not discuss future contingents, for instance.[3] The truth-relativist proposal is of necessity a general one, intended also to be applicable even in evaluative cases, in which their problems come more clearly to the surface. I will continue to focus, therefore, on aesthetic discourse.

Recall, then, the Callas debate, where Smith asserts (2) 'Callas is good', and Jones asserts its negation. MacFarlane 2005 defines relative truth for aesthetic utterances in this way:

> Aesthetic relativism: S is true at a context of use C_U and context of assessment C_A iff there is a proposition p such that
> (a) S expresses p at C_U, and
> (b) p is true at the world of C_U and the aesthetic standards of the assessor at C_A. (MacFarlane 2005, p. 325)

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[3] It is anyway unclear whether the contingency of the future requires that the future be open, as MacFarlane describes it. See Tweedale (2004) and García-Carpintero (forthcoming) for instance.

This differs from orthodox definitions of truth by adding the requirement that the occurrence or use of a sentence *S* be true at a context of utterance *and* at a context of assessment. Given assessment-sensitivity, assertions about aesthetic matters do not have absolute truth evaluations, and so they do not have absolute *correctness* conditions. Assertions may be correct and true if assessed when made, and incorrect when assessed elsewhere, and vice-versa. Now, as MacFarlane recognizes, making sense of relativism is a matter of understanding what it would be to *commit oneself* to the truth of an assessment-sensitive sentence or proposition. For a theoretical notion of this kind to have a function, it must have its place in the rational practice of assertion.

2. Evans's Challenge and MacFarlane's Reply

Gareth Evans (1985) has expressed a challenge to assessment-relativism in a poignant way, raising doubts about the effects of relativism on the practice of assertion. The view Evans criticizes corresponds to the view advanced by MacFarlane. Evans characterizes it as "the revolutionary idea that the evaluation of an utterance as correct or incorrect depends upon the time the evaluation is made (and so the evaluation varies)." (1980, p. 348) Although Evans is here addressing the case of tensed sentences and temporal propositions, the point he makes is general. We can, for our case, replace times by aesthetic standards.

> Such a conception of assertion is not coherent. In the first place, I do not understand the use of the ordinary word 'correct' to apply to one and the same historical act at some times and not at others, according to the state of the weather. Just as we use the terms 'good' and 'bad', 'obligatory' and 'permitted' to make an assessment, once and for all, of non-linguistic actions, so we use the term 'correct' to make a once-and-for-all assessment of speech-acts. Secondly... If a theory of sense permits a subject to deduce that a particular utterance will now be correct, but later will be incorrect, it cannot assist the subject in deciding what to say, nor in interpreting the remarks of others. What should he aim at, or take others to be aiming at? Maximum correctness? But of course, if he knew the answer to this question, it would necessarily generate a once-and-for-all assessment of utterances, according to whether or not they meet whatever condition the answer gave. (Evans (1985), pp. 349-5)

Evans's challenge is, I think, as follows. When we make sincere assertions, we aim to speak truly. If truth is assessment-sensitive, there is no final answer to the question of whether our assertion was correct when we made it. In our example, there is no single definite answer to the question of whether Smith's assertion that Callas is good was correct when she made it. If so, there is no single answer to the question of whether Smith, though an opera expert with full mastery of her standard, achieved the aim of speaking truly. At best, we can aim to speak truly from a context. But, from which context? If we can give an answer to this question, then we also generate a "once-and-for-all assessment of utterances, according to whether or not they meet whatever condition the answer gave." Consider the options:

(i) If it is truth at the context of utterance, or one picked from the context of utterance, then there is no need to relativize truth. (Smith may aim to say what is true in her own standard, or aim to say what is true in Jones's standard – but that is still truth relative to a circumstance of evaluation determined at the context of utterance, by the speaker's intentions, and so, for simplicity, truth relative to Smith's context of utterance).

(ii) Maximum truth (truth at all/most/some contexts) is not a good option either. Truth in all contexts would clearly generate an absolute evaluation of an utterance, a "once-and-for-all assessment of utterances". Moreover, as MacFarlane recently accepted,[4] truth in some/most contexts is a notion that is difficult to understand (his 2003 paper already includes some considerations about this on p. 333). Aiming at truth in some contexts is too loose a notion to be made to work. It would seem that any utterance of a contingent truth is true with respect to some contexts and not true with respect to some other contexts. So, even if Smith asserts something false, she could always rejoinder critics arguing that her assertion is true in some context or other. 'Most contexts' is even less clear; how can one aim at truth in most contexts if there are, arguably, indefinitely many possible contexts?

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[4] In conversation.

The challenge seems serious; it seems that the only contexts a speaker can significantly aim at are those accessible or determined at the context of utterance. If this is so, contexts of assessment are idle wheels in the definition of truth for occurrences of sentences. The context of assessment that would matter for evaluating utterances of sentences, and assertions, is the context of assessment that is identical to the context of utterance, i.e.,

> Aesthetic relativism: S is true at a context of use C_U and context of assessment C_A iff there is a proposition p such that
> (a) S expresses p at C_U, and
> (b) p is true at the world of C_U and the aesthetic standards of the assessor at C_A, and
> and $C_U = C_A$.

In our operatic example, the context of assessment relevant to assess Smith's assertion that Callas is good would be Smith's own context, or more precisely, Smith's own aesthetic standard at the context of utterance. This comes down to non-indexical contextualism: the relevant parameter for the evaluation of the truth of an utterance is settled at the context of utterance. Assessment-relativism would be, in practice, redundant.

MacFarlane, however, remains unconvinced and resists Evans's challenge. I will present what summarizes his published view.[5] MacFarlane has argued (2003, 2005) that assertion is a speech-act that can be characterized not in terms of a constitutive norm, but in terms of the commitments that speakers undertake when asserting. What is one committed to in asserting? MacFarlane's considered answer relies on a tripartite analysis of the commitments undertaken by speakers:

> (W) Commitment to withdraw the assertion if and when it is shown to have been untrue;
> (J) Commitment to justify the assertion (provide grounds for its truth) if and when it is appropriately challenged;
> (R) Commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts on or reasons from what

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[5] In seminars, and in conversation, John MacFarlane has sketched a reply to the challenge that preserves truth as the norm of assertion; it was formulated differently from how I have presented it here, and it is accompanied by a norm for retractions. In his book manuscript, he also suggests that there is a norm for retractions: one must retract a previous assertion as wrong when it is false at one's current context of assessment. The challenge applies equally to the new account offered by MacFarlane, as can be verified in the rest of this paper.

is asserted, and it proves to have been untrue (MacFarlane (2005), p.334).

Naturally, (W), (J), and (R) are all reasonable commitments to expect speakers to undertake, *if* truth is not assessment-relative. One should retract if what one said is proven false, one should be capable of providing grounds for what one asserts, one should be held responsible for passing on false information, etc. But, to accommodate assessment-sensitivity, these commitments must involve doing different things relative to different contexts of assessment. The alternatives that are not viable were mentioned earlier: (i) If, say, one is committed by (W) to withdraw one's assertion only when it is shown to have been untrue relative to parameters given by the context of utterance, then we dispense with assessment-relative truth; (ii) and if the commitment is to withdraw the assertion when untrue relative to all/most/some contexts, we also do not gain an assessment-relative notion of truth, as either once-and-for-all evaluations are generated, or incoherent commitments ensue. There are two genuine relativistic alternatives left: (iii) one incurs different commitments relative to different contexts of assessment where the putative refutation is given; (iv) one incurs different commitments relative to different contexts of assessment where *the asserter* is evaluating the putative refutation. MacFarlane discards (iii), for reasons significantly different to those advanced by Evans. For MacFarlane, if the relevant commitments one incurs concerned any context of assessment where a putative refutation is given, then it would be impossible to keep them, because it would be

> ...too damaging to a single person's body of assertions. If I withdraw some of my assertions because they are untrue relative to Bob's context and others because they are untrue relative to Marie's, I may end up with a body of assertions that is incoherent and reflects no one's point of view... It demands too much of asserters to give every challenger the home stadium advantage." (2005, p. 336)

Evans is concerned with a speaker not being able to aim at the truth, but MacFarlane draws attention to the dangers of ending up with no coherent point of view. The next section shows that Evans's challenge can be raised even against an account of assertion in terms of

commitments to assessment-sensitive truth, and that the problem is not that agents run the risk of having no coherent point of view to hold at a given time.

MacFarlane proposes that the *relevant* contexts of assessment are those that the asserter occupies at any future context where she assesses her previous assertion, hence choosing option (iv). The three commitments are thus reformulated, where C_1 is the context of utterance and C_2 the relevant contexts of assessment occupied by the asserter:

> (W)* In asserting that p at C_1, one commits oneself to withdrawing the assertion (in any future context C_2) if p is shown to be untrue relative to context of use C_1 and context of assessment C_2.
> (J)* In asserting that p at C_1, one commits oneself to justifying the assertion when it is appropriately challenged. To justify the assertion in a context C_2 is to provide grounds for the truth of p relative to context of use C_1 and context of assessment C_2.
> (R)* In asserting that p at C_1, one commits oneself to accepting responsibility (at any future context C_2) if, on the basis of this assertion someone else takes p to be true (relative to context of use C_1 and context of assessment C_2) and it proves to be untrue (relative to C_1 and C_2) (cf. MacFarlane 2005, p. 337).

The most significant consequence of the difference between (iii) and (iv), and the advantage of (iv) over (iii), is that if one is in disagreement with someone else, say over matters of taste or aesthetics, then, respecting the motivation for relativism, neither can be forced by her or his interlocutor to retract. With (iii), speakers would commit themselves to withdraw, justify, or be responsible for their assertions whenever people assess these assertions as untrue from significantly different perspectives. However, an asserter is under *no obligation* to undertake a commitment to retract an assertion, and admit that it was incorrect, when challenged by someone who does not share the same perspective.

To make it more vivid, consider this situation. Suppose that Jones is invited to lecture at the Maria Callas Admiration Society, but the event is a humiliation. All the society members dedicate themselves to challenging Jones's views, and showing how, on their view, she is wrong. Jones's assertion that Tebaldi is better than Callas is being assessed by challengers, and her assertion is not true at their context. Naturally, a situation like this has to be possible in a relativistic framework: two experts can have an irreducible disagreement as to

whether Callas is the better singer. Since, on assumption, there is no expert-independent truth of the matter, Jones cannot be forced to retract. MacFarlane's assessment-sensitive truth respects this, having an advantage over the most radical form of truth relativism in the vicinity, the one that takes contexts where any putative refutation is given to be the relevant context of assessment to which one must assume commitments.

Where does the real difference lie? The reformulated commitments are the commitments to withdraw, justify or be responsible for one's previous assertion with respect to one's context of utterance and one's current context of assessment. In the case of aesthetic standards, if Smith does not change her standard, then C_2 will still be equal to C_1. If she changes her standard significantly, and her assertion of (2) 'Callas is good' with respect to the current new standard is not true, then she is subject to (W*), that is, *she ought to retract her previous assertion*.

The crucial difference between the options described in (i) and (iv), as MacFarlane claims, comes out with respect to retractions, not disagreements. A retraction has the effect of assessing negatively a previous speech act (an assertion), one withdraws a previous statement because it *was* incorrect, and cancels some of its consequences in that one manifests that one can no longer be bound by the commitments previously undertaken.

Notice that the discussion here is not about whether propositional truth may be construed as relative to all sorts of contexts of assessment. The discussion was about *which* contexts of assessment are relevant for *assertion* and, relatedly, for *retraction*. MacFarlane believes those are the contexts described in option (iv). But if contexts of the type considered in (iv), those that the asserter currently[6] occupies that differ significantly from the context of utterance, are a special case of contexts of the type considered in option (iii), those where a putative refutation is given, then contexts of assessment that the speaker presently occupies

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[6] There should be no ambiguity here. "Currently" occurs embedded, and the context of assessment it determines is whatever context the speaker is occupying.

are also be problematic. The last section shows why this is the case.

3. No obligation to retract

What characterizes assessment sensitivity for MacFarlane is that utterance truth, and propositional truth, is relativized both to the context of utterance and to the context of assessment that the speaker currently occupies. This is not as radical a form of truth relativism as it might be. Nonetheless, I think, the contexts that the speaker currently occupies that differ significantly from the context of utterance are a special case of contexts where a refutation is given, and, because of this, Evans's challenge can be reformulated. I argue for this in the remainder of the paper.

Let us assume Smith is a rational agent, and is as knowledgeable as she can be about a topic. If a theory about assertion in terms of commitments is right, when Smith earnestly asserts that p, she is thereby under the obligation to F, where F is whatever the theory says she must do to upon asserting. Assuming she is earnest, we assume she does what she should. An adequate account of assertion ought to assign to Smith the right intentions. So, when she earnestly asserts that p, she should form the intention to F.

If there is such a thing as a rational agent knowingly, sincerely and earnestly, asserting that p, and if a theory of assertion is correct, then that agent should form an intention assigned by the theory. On MacFarlane's account, in virtue of asserting, the agent is assuming a given commitment or set of commitments, which characterize assertion. But if a sincere agent asserts that p, and does not form the intention to undertake the commitments assigned by the account, then, assuming the account is correct, that agent is irrational. And if a rational agent asserts that p, and does not form the intention to keep the commitments assigned by the account, then, assuming the account is correct, the agent is either insincere or not earnest. But if an agent is not irrational, and is earnest, yet still does not form the intention assigned by the

account, then that is an indication that the account is wrong. The speaker is not obliged to keep the commitments the account identifies. For instance, if a rational and earnest speaker is not seen as doing anything wrong by not retracting, then she had no obligation to retract in the first place.[7]

MacFarlane tries to resist Evans's challenge by preventing that speakers end up with incoherent sets of beliefs. But Evans's challenge, as I suggest to understand it anyway, is not that a speaker may have no coherent set of beliefs at a given time. It is also not that an individual agent cannot occasionally commit herself to unpredictable and unforeseeable consequences; agents can and do such things. Nor is it that she cannot count as having met a standard of correctness she did not have the intention of meeting, because accidentally one may keep commitments or do what is right, against one's original intentions not to keep them. The point behind Evans's challenge, as I see it, is rather that the norms that constitute or regulate an act cannot be such that the connection between *succeeding* in following them and earnestly *forming the intention to do so* be something merely accidental. To the same effect: the kind of commitment one undertakes when one earnestly and rationally performs an action cannot make the connection between succeeding in keeping the commitment and earnestly forming an intention to do so be merely accidental.[8]

The problem with assessment-relative truth, as I will now argue, is that speakers do not have to commit to it. And, since there is no such thing as a commitment that does not impose an obligation, speakers are not committed to assessment-relative truth.

The main problem I want to press can be put as follows: if assertion were

[7] This will be, ultimately, the reason why the objection also arises against MacFarlane's new account of assertion, partially characterized by a retraction norm.

[8] Of course, even when we succeed in keeping a promise when we have earnestly formed an intention to do so, to some extent that depends on the "accidental" fact that matters outside our control (and rational expectation when forming the intention) have not interfered. For instance, that we have not accidentally died in the meantime. These matters can be thought of as conditions under which, had they obtained, the ensuing obligation would have simply ceased to exist; or rather conditions that constitute a good excuse, all things considered, not to keep it even though it was still there. But neither alternative is of any help for MacFarlane.

characterized by (W)*, (J)* and (R)*, and one earnestly asserts what one knows to be true at the context of utterance, then, even if one's assertion *is perfectly correct* from the perspective of the context of assessment provided by the context of utterance itself, at the same time one *should be committed to admit* in a future context of assessment that the assertion *was*, after all, *wrong*. The reason for this is that it is in principle possible that there are future contexts of assessment where one occupies a standard different to the one she occupies now, determining conflicting commitments. But then Evans's challenge applies:

> If a theory of sense permits a subject to deduce that a particular utterance will now be correct, but later will be incorrect, it cannot assist the subject in deciding what to say, nor in interpreting the remarks of others. What should he aim at, or take others to be aiming at? (Evans, *idem*)

This can be illustrated with an example. Imagine that Smith is aware that many things are relative to perspectives. Her opinions on opera depend on the aesthetic standard she now masters; her culinary opinions depend on her current dispositions towards food, etc. She knows, moreover, that certain standards are bound to change with time, in ways that, from her current position, may be unpredictable or largely irrelevant for her present concerns. She is even favourable to treating taste and value predicates as predicates that express dispositional properties and to acknowledge that there is no *prima facie* reason to treat some dispositions as more veridical than others. So, imagine that she knows that people in her family, when they reach 60, lose the capacity to appreciate sweets. She knows that in the future, if and when she reaches the age of 60, she will not think that crème brûlée is tasty (i.e., she will not self-ascribe the disposition to appreciate crème brûlée). On MacFarlane's account, she should be puzzled, in envisaging now that there will come to be situations in which she will be forced to retract her current assertion, while, from the viewpoint of her present context of assessment, those situations do not constitute at all a reason for so doing. In fact, I do not think that this will prevent her from asserting, now, that crème brûlée is tasty. Certainly, Smith could have

aimed at the context she knows she will occupy when she is 60 – but had she done so, her standard of taste at 60 would still have been a standard of taste *fixed by the context of utterance*.

Now, as MacFarlane insists, there are indefinitely many possible contexts of assessment. In the operatic example, Smith may, also, due to some unexpected life-changing event, come to change her operatic standards and no longer accept that Callas was one of the best opera singers of the 20th century, something which, from her current situation, is unimaginable. But once again, judging by our intuitions (at least mine, anyway), as a matter of fact in her present situation she is only committed to truth from her current context. She should also be (now) committed to retract her present assertions about Callas as wrong when her dispositions towards opera change. Again, and with more force, these would be conflicting commitments that Smith would undertake. This is a conflicting requirement on the speaker. And it is against this idea that Evans complained.

As it turns out, in the situation I am conceiving, Smith is only committed to the correctness of her assertion at her current context. How do we judge her actual commitments in contrast with the commitments she should have if MacFarlane was right? Is she insincere? Is she not earnest? Or is she not a rational asserter? I think that all these questions have a negative answer, and that MacFarlane has not given us any justification to think otherwise.

This is then the main point I want to make: if assessment-sensitive truth has any bite, there should be contexts of assessment at which the relevant parameters determine commitments conflicting with those available to speakers at the context of assessment provided by the context of utterance itself. Rational, earnest, reflective speakers are in a position to envisage that possibility. But our intuitions tell us that – far from experiencing the puzzlement that MacFarlane's view entails – this is not going to deter us, when imaginatively in the shoes of these speakers, from making assertions, thereby consistently committing

ourselves in the way we ordinarily do (to truth at our current contexts).[9] Smith, as I am

claiming, will only commit herself to the correctness of her assertion with respect to standards

determined at her context of utterance, and she is not blameworthy in any way for so doing.[10]

There are two alternatives concerning what role (W*), (J*) and (R*) play in a theory.

The first alternative is that these commitments are part of a proposal for a purely descriptive

account of the actual practice of assertion. Now, Smith asserted something, that crème brûlée

is tasty. But she did not undertake the commitment to withdraw, justify or be responsible for

the truth of her present assertion with respect to a future context she knows she may occupy.

Likewise, when she asserted that Callas is good, she did not undertake the commitment to

withdraw, justify or be responsible for the truth of her present assertion with respect to a

future context she has no clue she may occupy. It follows that our assertoric practice is not

accurately described by those commitments, since rational and earnest agents can assert

without incurring them.

The second alternative is that the commitments (W*), (J*) and (R*) are part of a

revisionary account of assertion. Smith could have asserted without taking the relativized

commitments. But she would have violated obligations that should apply to her simply by

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[9] These considerations apply to most cases to which MacFarlane has suggested to apply his relativist
semantics. The only exception is the case of future contingents; but this is because in that case *both* the
class of histories open when the utterance is made, *and* the class open when the relevant future comes,
are envisaged by the speaker as relevant parameters of evaluation at the context of utterance. That is
precisely the case where what is most distinctive of MacFarlane's brand of relativism (that the
truth/correctness of utterances is to be appraised relative to parameters *not intended at the context of
utterance*) does not obtain.

[10] That there are no obligations to retract when what are involved are changeable standards of
correctness has been recently illustrated with an actual case. There is an ongoing petition to pardon
Alan Turing posthumously from the charges of indecency. The justice minister Lord McNally is
reported to have replied "A posthumous pardon was not considered appropriate as Alan Turing was
properly convicted of what at the time was a criminal offence. He would have known that his offence
was against the law and that he would be prosecuted. It is tragic that Alan Turing was convicted of an
offence which now seems both cruel and absurd — particularly poignant given his outstanding
contribution to the war effort. However, the law at the time required a prosecution and, as such, long-
standing policy has been to accept that such convictions took place and, rather than trying to alter the
historical context and to put right what cannot be put right, ensure instead that we never again return to
those times. (in *The Guardian*, 7 February 2012). It seems that retrospective assessments in cases like
this involve the assessment, not of the assertion, but of the *standard of correctness*, as suggested by
Lord MacNally's statement. This is in line with Sundell's (2011) disputes about contextual standards.

virtue of having asserted, on a proper conception of such practice. Has she violated any such obligations? And is she irrational if she only commits herself to truth at her context? I do not see what justifies that revisionary proposal: she *need not* accept now commitments with respect to her gustatory taste at age 60, nor, with even more reason, accept now commitments to truth at unforeseen aesthetic perspectives (whether she eventually comes to occupy those perspectives or not). Rather, possible future perspectives are irrelevant for all her present assertoric commitments (unless they are the intended ones).[11] So, commitments relativized to contexts of assessment are not part of a compelling revisionary account of assertion either.[12]

There does not seem to be any justification for the revisionary proposal. But there is justification against it. Presumably, the relativist wants different judgments of value to be equally veridical. The truth of the propositions at stake depends on subjects' responses to different things. That is why subjects would not have to retract when challenged by others. Those with different dispositions are not better positioned to assess a given matter than the subject who is being challenged. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true in the individual case. If one's dispositions towards desserts, or opera, change across time, one's later responses and reactions are not more veridical than one's earlier responses and reactions. A fortiori, one has no *obligation* to retract one's earlier assertion (which was correct when made) at a later time.

To sum up. As I pointed out in the previous section, MacFarlane rejects alternative (iii) to make sense of relative truth, because it is "too damaging to a single person's body of assertions". He advances (iv) as a still sufficiently relativist alternative, less damaging because we require that it is the very same subject that made the assertion who is now assessing it. However, we have just seen that if the subject has meanwhile relevantly changed

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[11] Can we think of the condition that one changes her gustatory or operatic standards as one whose obtaining would extinguish the obligation, or give us a good excuse not to keep it? That would be for MacFarlane to admit that the only *effective* obligation we incur in asserting is to say what is true at the context of utterance, and therefore to abandon what is distinctive of his "genuine" brand of relativism.

[12] A similar argument appears to be made by Jacob Ross and Mark Schroeder in their "Reversibility and Disagreement" (ms).

her standards, her assessment is irrelevant to the commitments that we may sensibly ascribe to her previous self. The same reasons that motivate relativism weigh against taking (iii) seriously, and should, *a fortiori*, weigh against taking (iv) seriously. Of course, if we require in addition that the subject who is doing the assessing has not changed her standards, then we are back in the moderate versions of relativism ("non-indexical contextualism"). Asserters are under no obligation to commit to retracting an assertion when challenged by someone who does not share the same perspective. This holds even when the challenger is the asserter herself in the future. Therefore, the correctness of assertions is not relative.

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