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## **Serial Fiction, The End?**

Andrew McGonigal (2013) presents some interesting data concerning truth in serial fictions. Such data has been taken by McGonigal, Cameron, and Caplan to motivate some form of contextualism or relativism. I argue, however, that many of these approaches are problematic, and that all are undermotivated as the data can be explained in a standard invariantist semantic framework given some independently plausible principles.

### **1. Introduction**

As Kripke (2013: 57) notes, typical utterances of sentences such as

1. Chewbacca is a Wookiee,

count as correct iff they are true according to the appropriate story. The contrast between (1) and

2. Chewbacca is a human,

then, is to be accounted for by the difference in the truth of (3) and (4):

3. According to the *Star Wars* films, Chewbacca is a Wookiee.
4. According to the *Star Wars* films, Chewbacca is a human.

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(3) is true, so the thought goes, and this underlies the acceptability of (1), whereas (4) is false and underlies the unacceptability of (2).<sup>1</sup>

To say that the correctness of sentences such as (1) and (2) go hand-in-hand with the truth of sentences like (3) and (4) is not to make any claims about the logical form of (1) and (2). In particular, to appeal to such a link is not to claim that (1) expresses the proposition expressed by (3), or even that (1) is itself true. For the purposes of our discussion, we need take no stand on these issues, and so I shall speak only of the correctness of sentences such as (1).

What I want to address in this paper is a puzzle for an account of the correctness conditions of sentence such as (1) raised by McGonigal (§2-3). In §4-§5 I discuss and assess extant contextualist and relativist accounts of the puzzle, arguing that the contextualist proposals are problematic. Then (§6) I outline my own preferred invariantist approach, before defusing (§7-§8) two objections to my proposal. The availability of this invariantist account thus undermines the motivation for contextualism and relativism.

## **2. McGonigal's Data**

McGonigal argues that serial fictions, such as the *Star Wars* films, whose production and reception are via “relevantly discontinuous episodes or instalments” and that are “construable as taking place within a single fictional world” (McGonigal 2013:165), present a set of

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<sup>1</sup> Kripke's account is used here for concreteness. We do not commit to it being the best way of accounting for the contrast between (1) and (2). Ironically, Kripke (2013: 58-59) thinks that since ‘Chewbacca’ is an empty name, sentences like (1) cannot express propositions and hence cannot be true. If this is correct, how can any embedding of (1), such as (3), be true? Kripke, it appears, is not entitled to his own theory of the correctness of (1)!

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distinctive data that any theory of fictional truth must account for. McGonigal illustrates this by considering the following hypothetical case.

In 1977 Young Girl is watching *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* (henceforth *Hope*) and she utters

5. Luke is Vader's son.

Following McGonigal,

Let us stipulate that the story of its immediate sequel *The Empire Strikes Back* [henceforth *Empire*], which portrays Darth Vader as Luke Skywalker's father, has not yet been constructed—in fact, since nobody expects [*Hope*] to be a success, the possibility of making a sequel hasn't even occurred to anyone. Let us also stipulate, as seems overwhelmingly plausible, that there is no evidence whatsoever in the first film that Vader is Luke's father, and ample evidence against it (McGonigal 2013: 166).

In 1980, after the release of *Empire*, Adult Woman is watching *Hope* and without knowing about the existence of *Empire*, she also utters (5). As McGonigal points out it is striking that Young Girl's utterance as assessed in 1977 is markedly worse than Adult Woman's utterance as assessed in 1980. The task for an account of the correctness conditions of (5) is to explain why Young Girl's utterance is worse than Adult Woman's.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> To say that Adult Woman's utterance is better than Young Girl's is to not to deny that Adult Woman's utterance is pathological, given her evidence.

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So how should we explain our differing assessments of Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterances? A natural first thought is to posit a difference in the correctness of their utterances. There appear to be two broad ways in which we could secure such a difference in correctness. First, we could say that because of the different contexts involved, the fiction that was relevant to our assessment of Young Girl's Utterance was *Hope*, whereas the fiction that was relevant to assessing Adult Woman's utterances was the composite fiction of *Hope* plus *Empire*. Alternatively, we could treat McGonigal's case as an instance of change over time, in the way that we would account for the difference in the correctness of an utterance of 'Thatcher is Prime Minister' made and assessed in 1977 compared to one made and assessed in 1980. Both approaches are found in the literature. I'll explore the prospects of accounting for McGonigal's data in these ways (§4-§5), before arguing (§6) for my own preferred treatment of the data which does not posit a difference in the correctness of utterances of (5). But first, I'll briefly examine some more of McGonigal's putative data.

### 3. More Data and The Contradiction Problem

McGonigal (2013: 166) also claims that a similar contrast can be generated by considering utterances of

6. According to *Hope*, Luke is Vader's son,<sup>3</sup>

and

7. In *Hope*, Luke is Vader's son.

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<sup>3</sup> In fact McGonigal uses 'it is true according to this film' in the context of watching *Hope*, but nothing turns on this.

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Now whilst I agree that our assessment of utterances of (7) mirrors our assessment of utterances of (5), it strikes me that McGonigal is incorrect regarding (6): both Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterances of (6) are infelicitous. And Cameron (2012: 192) seemingly agrees. Compare what we would say about a witness who provides a report on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August such that it is not the case that according to the report that P, just as Young Girl's utterance of (6) is false when she made it. If our witness then provided a further report on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August saying that P, this does not lead us to revise our verdict on the earlier report: it is still not the case that according to the earlier report that P. And this holds even if, according to the combined reports, P. But this later report is analogous to the next instalment of the *Star Wars* series, *Empire*. So the fact that according to *Empire*, Luke is Vader's son, and indeed the fact that according to *Hope+Empire*, Luke is Vader's son does not undermine the claim that (6) is false.<sup>4</sup>

The above argument depends on 'according to the fiction operators' behaving analogously to other 'according to' operators. But this does seem to be the case. For one thing, the meaning of 'according to *Hope*' looks compositional: it is for that reason that my class understands what I mean by it with very little prompting. Second, 'according to *Hope*' is intensional like other 'according-to' operators and seemingly for the same reasons: that someone or some evidence says that P does not settle P's truth; that someone says 'a is F' does not mean that there is an a; that someone says 'a is F' does not mean that they said 'b is F' even when a=b.

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<sup>4</sup> That our assessment of (6) and (7) come apart is not particularly strange since, as Sainsbury (2014) has noted, the relevant operators do have different truth conditions: in *War and Peace*, there are both fictional and real characters, but not according to *War and Peace*, there are both fictional and real characters. As Sainsbury notes, 'in' permits a more distanced stance with respect to the fiction than 'according to'.

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Third, we can agglomerate fictional according to operators. When discussing agglomeration of fictional operators Sainsbury (2009: §6.2) explicitly compares such operators with witness statements which can also be agglomerated. The comparison is supposed to provide an analogy: “Just as we can agglomerate the evidence from witnesses to generate a larger story than that told by any one of them, so we can agglomerate fictions” (2009: 123). Fourth, Sainsbury (2014: 279) notes that intuitively, (A) is true whereas (B) is false: (A) In the play *Othello*, Othello often speaks in magnificent blank verse; (B) According to the play *Othello*, Othello often speaks in magnificent blank verse. Sainsbury notes that for (B) “to be true, the play would have to *tell us* that Othello speaks in verse”. Fifth, like other according to operators, fictional according to operators are non-monotonic in the sense I describe below. All this suggests that ‘according to *Hope*’ is like other ‘according to’ operators, in that our assessments of what is true according to *Hope* ought not to vary.

Caplan (2014: 69-71), however, gives an argument for the changing correctness of (6) which he then takes to motivate his own temporalist solution (see §5). Caplan’s ‘contradiction problem’ consists in the prima facie truth of the following:<sup>5</sup>

8. *Hope* is a part of *Hope+Empire*.
9. It is not the case that according to *Hope+Empire*, Vader is Luke’s father and Vader is not Luke’s father.

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<sup>5</sup> Caplan talks about the relevant claims being true *in* the relevant fiction rather than *according to* the relevant fiction. Tillman (2014), however, presents the Caplan’s argument in terms of the according to operators. On the account of ‘in’ sentences that I sketch at the end of §6, the analogue of (10) is false and so the alleged problem does not even arise.

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10. According to *Hope*, Vader is not Luke's father, but according to *Hope+Empire*, Vader is Luke's father.

Caplan, however, thinks that there is a problem with accepting (8)-(10) since, although they are not contradictory, they are "at least weird" (2014: 70). As it stands, this is not much of an objection. Indeed, (8)-(10) strike me unproblematically true. Caplan only adds that the truth of (8)-(10) is "a bit like a consistent set of propositions being inconsistent with one of its subsets" (2014: 70). But in one obvious sense (8)-(10) are not like that, since it is contradictory to suppose that a consistent set of propositions is inconsistent with one of its subsets. So it is not clear in what sense Caplan's analogy is supposed to help us understand the weirdness of (8)-(10).<sup>6</sup>

Caplan's solution is to deny (10) by saying that the correctness of (6) changes and so (6) is now correct. If this is the only way out of Caplan's puzzle, then we should conclude with McGonigal that there is a contrast between Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterances of (6).

But it is easy to show that the truth of (8)-(10) is not problematic, and so we are not forced to say that different utterances of (6) differ in felicity. For instance, Lewis (1978) has a particularly elegant explanation of (8)-(10). The pattern exemplified by (8)-(10) can be given by the following, where O is a sentential operator:

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<sup>6</sup> Cook (2014) claims that the Luke of *Hope* is distinct from the Luke of *Hope+Empire*, since he thinks that (10) shows that the Lukes of these fictions have incompatible properties. But (10) no more shows this than the fact that according to the Ancients, Hesperus is not visible in the morning, and according to Kripke, Hesperus is visible in the morning shows that the Ancients and Kripke were not talking about the same planet.

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11.  $O(A, C) \& O(A\&B, \sim C)$

Let us call an operator,  $O$ , which allows for instances of (11) ‘strongly non-monotonic’ (an operator which allows for instances of  $O(A, C) \& \sim O(A\&B, C)$  is weakly non-monotonic).

Lewis held, and it is widely accepted, that counterfactual conditionals are weakly non-monotonic in the sense that

Antecedent Strengthening:  $(A > C) \supset ((A\&B) > C)$

is invalid, and, moreover, are strongly non-monotonic in that  $(A > C) \& ((A\&B) > \sim C)$  is consistent.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Lewis cashes out truth in fiction in the following terms:

12. According to *Hope*, Vader is not Luke’s father iff if *Hope* were told as known fact, Vader would not be Luke’s father.

13. According to *Hope+Empire*, Vader is Luke’s father iff if *Hope+Empire* was told as known fact, Vader would be Luke’s father.

Now given the strong non-monotonicity of counterfactuals, it is clear that the counterfactuals on the right hand side of (12) and (13) can both be true and so (10) can be true as well.

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<sup>7</sup> See section 9 of my 2014 for a defence of the invalidity of Antecedent Strengthening.



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Moreover, the truth of (10) does not turn on whether or not *Hope+Empire* is contradictory, which it isn't, nor on whether *Hope* is a part of *Hope+Empire*, which it is. So Lewis explains the data Caplan finds puzzling.

More generally, the question is whether according to operators strongly non-monotonic? If they are, (8)-(10) are inconsistent, if they are not, then the objection lapses. But it is clear that according to operators are strongly non-monotonic in general. It can be true according to evidence E, Smith did it (or is most likely to have done it), whereas according to evidence E+F, Jones, not Smith, did it. So given that there is no problem in general with strongly non-monotonic operators, it is not clear why according to operators should not be strongly non-monotonic in the case of fictions.<sup>8</sup> As such, a commitment to (8)-(10) is unproblematic as such phenomena are predicated by an independently motivated non-monotonic account of according to operators.

So I dispute McGonigal's account of the data. Nevertheless, although some of what I say below presupposes this, much of what I say can be amended if we side with McGonigal regarding (6). In particular, the positive account of the data that I propose can be amended to account for varying assessments in (6) along the lines of my account of our varying assessment of (7).

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Sainsbury (2014) claims that since (i) according to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Parker did not phone Dr Sheppard, it cannot be the case that (ii) according to the early chapters of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Parker phoned Dr Sheppard. Sainsbury's thinks this because *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is not an inconsistent fiction. But why think that endorsing (i) and (ii) makes Ackroyd an inconsistent fiction? One reason would be the monotonicity of 'according to' operators. But as we have seen, it seems more plausible to think that fictional operators are non-monotonic.

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#### 4. Context-Sensitivity

Building on the work of MacFarlane (2009) and Weatherson (2009), we can delineate four ways in which we can accommodate the thought that different contextually-determined fictions are relevant to assessing Young Girl’s and Adult Woman’s utterances of (5). The four options are given by the answers to two questions.<sup>9</sup> First, do the relevant fictions affect the content of the correctness conditions of utterances of (5)? Views that answer ‘yes’ are *indexicalist*. An alternative says that although the contextually-determined fictions do not affect the correctness condition common to Young Girl’s and Adult Woman’s utterances of (5), the correctness of their utterances differs since this correctness condition is true/false relative to the contextually-determined fiction. Such views are *nonindexicalist*.

Second, we can ask whether the relevant fictions are supplied by the speaker’s context or by the assessor’s context (this nonexhaustive list seems to exhaust the plausible options)? Views which take the former option, we’ll label *contextualist*, whereas those which take the latter option, we’ll call *relativist*. Combing the possible answers to these questions generates four views:

	Which context determines the relevant fiction?	
	The Speaker’s Context	The Assessor’s Context
The contextually relevant fiction affects the correctness conditions	Indexical Contextualism	Indexical Relativism
The correctness conditions	Nonindexical Contextualism	Nonindexical Relativism

<sup>9</sup> This section closely follows Weatherson’s 2009.

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hold relative to the contextually relevant fiction		
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Some of these types of position are familiar from other debates. For example, the first person pronoun ‘I’ is given an indexical contextualist treatment, since the *proposition* expressed when using ‘I’ depends on the *speaker’s* context. Our standard treatment of possible world semantics, on the other hand, is a version of nonindexical contextualism, since which proposition is expressed does not (typically) depend on the contextually-determined world, but propositions are *true relative* to the world of the *speaker*. Relativist views are less familiar, but nonindexical relativism has been championed for a number of areas of discourse by MacFarlane (2014), whereas Weatherson (2009) argues for an indexical relativist treatment of indicative conditionals.

We can see that all four styles of view can account for our differential assessments of the utterances of (5). As the contexts of the speaker and assessor coincide in the cases above, so that the fiction relevant to the correctness of Young Girl’s utterance is *Hope*, whereas the fiction relevant to the correctness of Adult Woman’s utterance is *Hope+Empire*, all we need to show is that both indexicalists and nonindexicalists can account for the data.

An indexicalist (contextualist), like Cameron (2012), claims that Young Girl’s utterance of (5) is correct iff

6. According to *Hope*, Luke is Vader’s son.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cameron (2012: 192) says that Young Girl’s utterance expresses (6), but the indexical contextualist strategy does not require this commitment. Moreover, Cameron claims that ‘Star Wars’ is a context-sensitive expression

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So, as (6) is false, Young Girl's utterance is incorrect. On the other hand, Adult Woman's utterance of (5) is correct iff

14. According to *Hope+Empire*, Luke is Vader's son

is true, which it is.

The nonindexicalist, on the other hand, can say that the correctness condition for both Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterances is

15. Fictionally, Luke is Vader's son,<sup>11</sup>

but that (15) is false relative to *Hope*, making Young Girl's utterance incorrect, but true relative to *Hope+Empire*, making Adult Woman's utterance correct.

So far, so good then for our contextualists and relativists. There is more data to be explained, however, as we can pull apart the contexts of the speaker and the assessor. To see this

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which, in Young Girl's context, refers to *Hope*, and so Young Girl's utterance of (5) expresses (6). But the context-sensitivity of 'Star Wars' cannot explain how Young Girl expresses (6) with (5), since Young Girl's utterance does not contain a token of 'Star Wars'. The indexical contextualist should either withdraw from claiming that young Girl expresses (6), or else appeal to unarticulated constituents to explain how an utterance of (5) expresses (6).

<sup>11</sup> The nonindexicalist cannot employ (6) because, as I argued above, the truth value of (6) does not change. And although the truth value of (7) does change, this too does not suit the nonindexicalist's purposes for the reason I give below.

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suppose that in 1980 Adult Woman watches a tape of what Young Girl said in 1977, and utters ‘she’s right—Luke is Vader’s son’. It seems that this utterance of Adult Woman’s is also correct. As we shall see, this fact cannot be straightforwardly captured by contextualists.

For the indexical contextualist, like Cameron, Young Girl’s utterance is correct iff (6). But (6) is false *simpliciter* (cf. Cameron 2012: 192). As a result Young Girl is not correct and so Adult Woman’s positive retrospective assessment of Young Girl’s utterance of (5) is incorrect according to the indexical contextualist.<sup>12</sup>

McGonigal (2013: 173) raised the above problem for indexical contextualism, but it is easy to see that it extends to nonindexical contextualism as well, as MacFarlane (2007: 22-23) observes. To see this, note that on a temporalist view of propositions (nonindexical contextualism with respect to times), if I assert at 1pm the proposition that it is raining, and you assert this same proposition at 3pm, there is no real sense in which we have agreed despite the common proposition asserted. Intuitively, what I said concerned 1pm and what you said concerned 3pm, and this is why we do not agree. One can see this by noting that I would be incorrect, if it was not raining at 1pm, and yet you would be correct, if it rained at 3pm. Similarly, you would not be correct at 3pm to say of my earlier utterance, ‘Lee’s right, it is raining’. And what applies to nonindexical contextualism with respect to times, applies to nonindexical contextualism with respect to fiction: what Young Girl says concerns *Hope* and what Adult Woman says concerns *Hope+Empire*. As a result, the nonindexical contextualist cannot capture the truth of Adult Woman’s positive retrospective assessment of Young Girl.

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<sup>12</sup> This is the familiar (dis)agreement problem for indexical contextualism. I cannot do justice to this subject here, but the problem motivates alternative approaches.

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McGonigal also claims that indexical contextualists face a second problem. It is clear that in the above set-up Adult Woman and Young Girl were watching the same film, namely *Hope*. McGonigal (2013: 173) claims that the “[indexical] contextualist account sketched above does not obviously have the resources to address this”. McGonigal is very brief at this point and offers no supporting argument for this claim. And *prima facie* all that the indexical contextualist is committed to is that Young Girl’s and Adult Woman’s utterances of (5) are subject to different correctness conditions on account of the different fictions being salient in the speaker’s contexts, not that they cannot watch the same films.

Nevertheless, I think there is a second challenge here for indexical contextualism. As we noted above, not only is there a difference in the felicity of Young Girl’s and Adult Woman’s utterances of (5), there is also a corresponding difference in their utterances of

7. In *Hope*, Luke is Vader’s son.

But how can the correctness of (7) vary? The indexical contextualist says that the context-neutral content of an utterance of (5) does not determine a complete correctness condition, for it needs to be supplemented with a contextually-determined fiction. But (7) is not like this, since the overt linguistic material ‘in *Hope*’ explicitly supplies a fiction, namely, *Hope*. Moreover, why should it be relevant to the correctness of (7) whether *Hope* is the salient fiction or whether both *Hope* and *Empire* are salient? After all, (7) stipulates that we are restricting our attention to *Hope*. The nonindexical contextualist, on the other hand, says that the proposition expressed by an utterance of (5) is to be assessed relative to a contextually supplied fiction. But (7) overtly specifies which fiction it is concerned with and this overrides any contextually supplied fiction. To see this consider what we say about nonindexical

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contextualism concerning worlds or times. Let us stipulate that at w/t it is raining but that actually/now it is not raining. Given this, an utterance of ‘At w/t it is raining’ even when made actually/now is true. This is because the relevant world/time is not that of the context of utterance, but rather that specified by the utterance. Further, (7) is not true relative to *Hope+Empire*, say, since *Hope* and *Empire* are silent on the issue of (7), as opposed to (5). That is, the *Star Wars* films are not reflexive fictions in that they do not concern themselves. And it is hard to see how (7) could be true relative to *Hope+Empire* in any other way. That is, although we allow for truths in fiction which are not the result of what is said, such as in *War and Peace*, there are both fictional and real characters, and in the play *Othello*, Othello often speaks in magnificent blank verse, (7) seems nothing like these.

Cameron (2012: 192) claims that what ‘Star Wars’ refers to is a context-sensitive matter. Can the contextualist exploit this alleged context-sensitive to explain the changing correctness of (7)? In order for this response to be adequate, the indexical contextualist must say that ‘Hope’ can refer to *Hope+Empire* as well as to *Hope*.<sup>13</sup> But one need not deny the possibility of synecdoche to think this implausible. And, given that ‘in the first *Star Wars* film made by George Lucas, Luke is Vader’s son’ patterns in the same way as (7), the problem ramifies since the indexical contextualist also has to claim that ‘the first *Star Wars* film made by George Lucas’ can refer not only to *Hope*, but also to *Hope+Empire*! But by what metasemantic mechanism is this achieved? For one thing, *Hope+Empire* isn’t even a film, let alone the first *Star Wars* film made by Lucas. Because of this, I don’t think such a contextualist explanation of our varying judgements of (7) is credible.

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<sup>13</sup> Cameron himself does not claim that ‘Hope’ is context sensitive in this way, only that “‘Star Wars’, ‘Darth Vader’ etc.” (2012: 192) are.

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Given the above problems for contextualism, it is worth pursuing other explanations of McGonigal's data. McGonigal (2013: 174) himself suggests that we "investigate a range of non-standard forms of context sensitivity" and McGonigal focuses his discussion on nonindexical relativism (and as I've shown above nonindexical contextualism is problematic).

McGonigal (2013: 176) considers the following nonindexical relativist proposal

An utterance of 'P' is correct iff 'P' is true relative to the set of fictional episodes that are salient in the context that the utterance of 'P' is assessed from.

Now assuming that McGonigal intends (7) to be a substitution instance of P (cf. McGonigal 2013: 176), the above relativist correctness conditions cannot be correct. This is because given that (7) explicitly specifies that we are concerned only with *Hope*, the fact that *Empire* is also salient does not affect the felicity of utterances of (7) (compare the analogous problem we raised for contextualism above). Another way to see the problem is to note that McGonigal says that

Truth relative to a set of episodes can be treated as e.g. truth in the fiction that such episodes compose or make appropriate. Truth in fiction can then also be treated standardly—for example, à la Lewis or Walton (McGonigal 2013: 176).



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But given that *Hope+Empire* is not a reflexive fiction, (7) is not true in *Hope+Empire*. To illustrate with Lewis's theory, it is not true in the closest worlds where *Hope+Empire* is told as known fact that in *Hope* Luke is Vader's son, since in those worlds there is no *Hope*.

Nevertheless, I don't think this is a deep problem for the nonindexical relativist. The above account captures all of the above data regarding (5): as (5) is false relative to *Hope*, Young Girl's utterance assessed in 1977 is incorrect; but as (5) relative to *Hope+Empire* is true, then both Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterance of (5) assessed in 1980 are correct, as is Adult Woman's retrospective assessment of what Young Girl said. And as regards (7), the nonindexical relativist can adopt my account of (7) given at the end of §6, but add that what counts as the world of the fiction is determined by the fictions salient in the context of assessment, rather than by the eternalist's maximal fiction.

In any case, in §6-8 I argue that there is no need to embrace relativism, and that if we want to treat the case of Young Girl and Adult Woman in the same way that we treat seemingly analogous non-fictional cases, then we should not relativize truth to fiction.<sup>14</sup> But first, let's consider the other way in which one might appeal to context to account for McGonigal's data.

## 5. A Change in the Facts

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<sup>14</sup> For reasons of space, I cannot offer an extended discussion of an indexical relativist treatment of the above data. I merely note that (i) it is unclear whether such an account is compatible with Stalnaker's account of assertion (see Weatherston 2009: 343-344 for discussion), (ii) as with indexical contextualism, such an approach has no account of our the varying assessment of (7), and (iii) as I argue below such an account is unnecessary and does not offer a unified account of seemingly similar phenomena.

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An alternative explanation of the putative difference in correctness of Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterances of (5) is to say that the content of a fiction can change over time as a result of the addition of subsequent episodes, and then to appeal not to different contextually-determined fictions, but to different contextually-determined times. So just as one utterance of

16. It is raining

can be false at  $t$  and another true at  $t^*$ , Young Girl's utterance of (5) made and assessed in 1977 is false, and yet Adult Woman's utterance of (5) made and assessed in 1980 is true, in virtue of the changing content of *Hope*.

Now just as there are four views regarding context-sensitivity with respect to fiction, there are four views regarding context-sensitivity to time. In the case of change, however, relativism is not a plausible option since our assessment of an earlier utterance of (16) does not depend on the time of assessment, but on the time of utterance.

A first approach adopts indexical contextualism following Frege (1956: 296) and says that the time of utterance affects the correctness conditions of utterances. Applying this approach to the case at hand, the correctness condition of Young Girl's utterance is something like

17. In 1977, in *Hope*, Vader is Luke's father,

which sounds false, and so could explain the why Young Girl's utterances of (5) sounds bad.

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On the other hand, the correctness condition of Adult Woman's utterance of (5) is

18. In 1980, in *Hope*, Vader is Luke's father,

which sounds true, and so could explain why Adult Woman's utterance sounds good.

Alternatively, one might instead follow Prior (1969) and embrace nonindexical contextualism which says that the correctness condition of utterances of (5) is given by

7. In *Hope*, Luke is Vader's son,

but that this correctness condition is true relative to the time of utterance. And whereas (7) is false relative to 1977, it is true relative to 1980 due to a change in the fictional facts, and it is this difference in truth value which explains our differing assessments of Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterances. This is the approach taken by Caplan (2014).

Unfortunately, like the contextualist views of the previous section, this approach does not capture the retrospective assessment data, and for the same reasons. Indexical contextualism fails because the truth value of (17) does not change, and as result neither does the correctness of Young Girl's utterance, meaning that Adult Woman's positive assessment of Young Girl is misplaced. Nonindexical contextualism fails because what Young Girl says concerns 1977, whereas what Adult Woman says concerns 1980, and so Adult Woman would be wrong to positively assess Young Girl's earlier utterance (compare what we said about nonindexicalism and 'it is raining' in §3).

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Views which posit a change in the fictional facts are also subject to a second objection (cf. Cook, 2014). On such views, there ought to be a true reading of the following, but there doesn't seem to be:

19. Although Vader is Luke's father, he didn't used to be.

This is because such views license the truth of

20. In *Hope*, Vader is Luke's father, but it was the case that in *Hope*, Vader is not Luke's father.

Of course, there is also a false reading of (19), namely 'in *Hope*, Vader is Luke's father, but he didn't used to be', but the predicted availability of a true reading is *prima facie* problematic. In fact, (20) itself should be rejected since in 1980 we would positively assess an utterance of (7) by Young Girl in 1977. So regardless of the unavailability of a true reading of (19), the fact that they countenance (20) raises a problem for the temporal contextualist treatment of (5).

Tillman (2014) suggests a slightly different approach which appeals to a change in the facts. Rather than saying what is true in *Hope* changes, Tillman suggests that it is what is true according to the *Star Wars* fiction that changes as the *Star Wars* fiction expands or is rewritten. Tillman's treatment is as problematic as the above views, however.

First, Young Girl's utterance concerned the *Star Wars* fiction in 1977 when, according to it, Vader is not Luke's father. And nothing about this changes as the *Star Wars* fiction expands.

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As a result Tillman does not capture the retrospective assessment data. Relatedly, Tillman predicts the truth of (19) and (20) since according to the *Star Wars* fiction, Vader is Luke's father, but it was the case that according to the *Star Wars* fiction, Vader is not Luke's father. Finally, Tillman does not explain the variability of the felicity of sentences which overtly contain fiction operators concerning particular episodes, such as 'in *Hope*, Vader is Luke's father'.<sup>15</sup>

We cannot, then, explain McGonigal's data by appealing to a change in the fictional facts.

## **6. Invariantism**

We noted above that there are two ways to address the data that McGonigal presents. The first is to say that our differential judgements reflect a difference in correctness. This is the route that we explored above. The alternative says that there is no change in correctness, and so the differential judgments are to be explained in some other way. Let us call such approaches 'invariantist', since the correctness of utterances of sentences like (5) is invariant. What I do in the remainder of the paper is defend a version of invariantism.

Any invariantist position is comprised of two parts. First, it gives invariant correctness conditions for sentences such as (5). Second, since the correctness of Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterances are the same, it must provide an alternative explanation of our differential assessment. Regarding the first element, the correctness conditions I wish to endorse are those that say that the invariant fiction relevant to assessing utterances of (5) is

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<sup>15</sup> Tillman (2014) claims his account provides a solution to the contradiction problem of §3. But it does not, for the simple reason that what is true according to *Hope* does not change, even if what is true according to the *Star Wars* fiction does change.

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the *maximal* or *total* narrative, which contains the various ordered episodes or instalments as component parts. Thus, in the case of [*Hope*], the relevant fiction is the total Star Wars story, as revealed in whatever (canonical) episodes have been or will be produced. On this account [Young Girl's] utterance in 1977 is not worse than [Adult Woman's] later utterance in point of [correctness], since both are [we may assume, correct] (McGonigal 2013: 168).<sup>16</sup>

McGonigal's primary objection to these invariantist correctness conditions is that adopting them would make readers ignorant of the fictional facts:

it seems to always be an eminently open epistemic possibility that *The Amazing Spiderman* series will conclude with an episode that reveals that all the events portrayed in previous comics were only, for example, imaginative dreams ... But it beggars belief that when reading the comic books in the 1960s, ordinary readers were not in a position to know that Peter Parker was the superhero Spiderman, that he battled the Green Goblin, etc. The point is not only that such truths seem canonical, partially constitutive of the very fictional world of *The Amazing Spiderman*. ... Much of our capacity to enjoy such popular fictions would be undermined if we were not allowed to take ourselves to know what was happening in a given episode ... But given [invariantism] about fictional truth,

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<sup>16</sup> McGonigal labels this 'extreme realism', but in what sense is this view extreme?

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together with the freedom of narrative creation, reinvention, and post hoc correction which comprise an important and familiar aspect of many such popular fictions, it becomes difficult to see how we could ever be in a position to claim such knowledge (McGonigal 2013: 170).

McGonigal makes a number of claims in this passage but the essence of his argument is as follows:

21. If invariantism is true, an utterance of 'Peter Parker is dreaming' in the 60s is correct.
22. If an utterance of 'Peter Parker is dreaming' in the 60s is correct, then readers of the Spiderman comics in the 60's did not know that Peter Parker is a superhero.
23. Readers in the 60s did know that Peter Parker is a superhero.
24. Therefore, invariantism is false.

The argument is valid and (21) captures the invariantist correctness conditions that above, so it is clear that the invariantist must reject at least one of (22) or (23).

What McGonigal says to support (23) does not, in fact, entail it. McGonigal claims that in order to successfully engage with the fiction we must be allowed to *take ourselves* to know what is happening. But one can take oneself to know something even if one doesn't know it. In any case, what seems to be the datum which any theory should respect is that readers of

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the comics in the 60s knew *what is true according to those comics*. But the invariantist can allow for that, since it is true according to those comics that Peter Parker is a superhero. So if we read (22) as concerning knowledge of what is true according to the comics, then (22) is false. It is not further required that 60s readers know that according to the maximal fiction that Parker is a superhero, since, as things turn out, he is not. Moreover, the grounds on which 60s readers would claim that Parker is a superhero would be the same grounds on which readers of the 60s comics today, unaware of the later comics, would also make that claim. But as McGonigal himself concedes, such grounds are not decisive, since in the case McGonigal describes it is false today that Parker is a superhero.

So, McGonigal's chief objection to the proposed invariantist correctness conditions fails. As noted above, though, any invariantist must also offer an explanation of our differing judgments of Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterances in terms other than correctness. McGonigal considers and rejects one particular invariantist explanation of these judgements:

the intuitive difference between the two assertions is explained by the fact that [Young Girl, unlike Adult Woman] is not in a position to acquire any suitable warrant for [her] claim, given our stipulation that there are no properties of the first film that might be appealed to in support of it (McGonigal 2013: 168).

McGonigal argues convincingly, however, that this invariantist explanation is not compelling:



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Suppose that both [Young Girl and Adult Woman] utter ‘There is a donkey next door’ when there is a donkey next door, but neither are in a good position to know that. Suppose further that the donkey is separated from [Adult Woman] by an unlocked door, and from [Young Girl] by a locked door. This scenario seems analogous to the view of the original cases ... In each case, a truth is uttered without good evidence, but one subject is in a better position to access that truth than the other. It doesn’t seem, however, that we respond to the two pairs of cases analogously (McGonigal 2013: 170).

McGonigal’s example shows that it is not *merely* a difference in epistemic accessibility that explains our differential assessment of utterances of (5). But invariantism is not committed to explaining our differing assessments in this manner. We can make a start on giving a better invariantist explanation by noting that McGonigal’s donkey case and the *Star Wars* case are disanalogous. In particular, in the *Star Wars* case there is a change in *our evidence* between assessing the utterances of ‘Luke is Vader’s son’, whereas there is no such change in our evidence between assessing the utterances in McGonigal’s donkey case. If we are to construct a case analogous to the *Star Wars* case, we should mirror this feature of the original. So let us alter McGonigal’s donkey case accordingly.

At t1 Young Girl is on the top floor of a skyscraper in room A, which is next to the locked room B. Young Girl has no good reason to think that there is a donkey in room B. Moreover, Young Girl has good evidence against there being a donkey in room B: she usually sneezes violently when there is a donkey around, and yet she is not sneezing; donkeys are not very

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often found on the top floor of skyscrapers; Young Girl presses her ear to the wall adjoining room B and hears nothing. Observing from the corridor, we share her evidence. Nevertheless, Young Girl utters

25. There is a donkey next door.

At  $t_2$  the door of room B is opened and, much to our surprise, we see what certainly looks like a donkey.

At  $t_3$  Adult Woman, who is in room C on the other side of room B, also utters (25). Adult Woman is also allergic to donkeys and has the same evidence against their being a donkey in room B as does Young Girl.

I think that in this case, as in McGonigal's original *Star Wars* case it is "natural to feel that [Young Girl's utterance as assessed at  $t_1$ ] is in some sense worse than [Adult Woman's as assessed at  $t_3$ ]" (McGonigal 2013: 166). Moreover, once we reassess Young Girl's utterance from  $t_3$ , it sounds correct, just as Adult Woman's retrospective assessment of Young Girl's utterance of (5) did. More generally, when *we* have lots of evidence for  $\sim p$  and someone says that  $p$ , we think the utterance infelicitous. But then if we come to have lots of evidence for  $p$ , utterances of  $p$  sound (more) felicitous regardless of whether they occurred before or after our evidence gathering.

The suggestion, then, is that current instalments of a serial fiction represent defeasible evidence for what is true according to the maximal fiction of which it is a part. So when the only evidence for truth in the maximal *Star Wars* fiction is *Hope*, utterances of 'Vader is

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Luke's father's sound bad as this is not what the evidence supports. But when the evidence also includes *Empire*, utterances of (5) now sound good as this is what the new, expanded evidence supports. That is, *Empire* defeats the evidence we had for rejecting (5) by providing a rebutting defeater.<sup>17</sup>

Now, just as we do not take the revised donkey case above to motivate relativizing truth to the assessor's evidence, we should not take the *Star Wars* case to motivate relativizing truth to the assessor's evidence (the fiction of the assessor's context). What changes in both cases is not the correctness of the utterances, but rather our ability to assess them as correct. A more natural conclusion is that the correctness of an utterance depends on the facts, whereas our ability to assess utterances as correct depends on *our* evidence. By adopting these independently plausible principles, and by appealing to facts about the total maximal fiction, we have a *unified* explanation of both the *Star Wars* case and the revised donkey case. It is for this reason, then, that we should prefer invariantism to relativism.

One might object, however, that when Young Girl utters (5) there are no present-tensed facts that make her utterance correct, but when Young Girl utters (25) there is a present-tensed fact that makes this correct. But we can generate the same patterning as in the *Star Wars* case as we do with non-fictional cases that concern the future. Consider the following scenario. Ingrid is watching a game of baseball between the Northampton No Hoppers and the Inverness Invincibles. In the first innings of the game the No-Hoppers miraculously score a run. In

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<sup>17</sup> On defeasible reasoning and evidence, see Pollock (1987). Serial fiction also provides instances of undercutting defeaters, as in the case of Peter Parker dreaming discussed above. Wright (2008: 179-182) notes that the kind of patterning we have been discussing could not motivate relativism over a defeasibly grounded assertion of the type advocated here.

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response, Ingrid says ‘that is the winning strike’. Given that the Invincibles have never been beaten, have always scored at least ten runs, and that Ingrid has no inside information or expertise, Ingrid’s utterance sounds bad. As things go, no more runs are scored, and so the No-Hoppers improbably beat the Invincibles one-nil. After the game, but without knowing the score, Brigit settles down to watch a recording of the game. Upon seeing the strike she says ‘that is the winning strike’. Brigit’s utterance, whatever other defects it may have, is clearly correct. Similarly, we can retrospectively report that Ingrid was right. So in these ways what we want to say about the baseball game matches what we want to say about unplanned serial fiction. But there is no tendency to relativize truth to *evidence* in this case, so given the analogous nature of the *Star Wars* case, we should not relativize to fiction (evidence) there either. The invariantist, then, provides a uniform explanation of all the cases discussed: correctness turns on the facts, our ability to judge correctly depends on our evidence.<sup>18</sup>

We noted above that our assessment of utterances of

### 7. In *Hope*, Luke is Vader’s son

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<sup>18</sup> Cook (2014) also notes that installments provide defeasible evidence for what is true in the serial fiction. He concludes from this, however, that statements such as (5) have no truth value, only probabilities. But as we have just seen, the fact that there can be defeasible evidence for something does not warrant this conclusion. Cook also disputes the positive retrospective assessment of Young Girl’s utterance claiming that it would be “perverse” to claim this utterance was correct; rather we should say “you haven’t got evidence for that yet”. But it is clear that Young Girl’s utterance of (5) was correct, just as her utterance of (25) was. Of course, it would be appropriate in both cases to respond that Young Girl didn’t have evidence for her claim, but why would that mean that her utterance was not correct in the relevant sense?

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varies as well as our assessment of utterances of (5). Again, I want to say that the correctness of (7) does not vary and what is correct is tied to the maximal fiction. However, it is not plausible to say that in *Hope*  $P$  iff according to the maximal *Star Wars* fiction,  $P$ . To see this notice that whereas

26. According to the *Star Wars* episodes so far, Luke visits Yoda on Dagobah

is true,

27. In *Hope*, Luke visits Yoda on Dagobah

is not, since Luke doesn't visit Yoda until *Empire*.

So what, then, should the invariantist say about the truth conditions of (7)? What later episodes of *Star Wars* reveal is what had to obtain in *Hope* in order for the later episodes to be true. Given that it is true in/according to *Empire* that Luke is Vader's son and that 'is Vader's son' is a substance sortal, then it had to be the case in *Hope* that Luke is Vader's son. To put the point another way, consider the world of the *Star Wars* fictions. 'In *Hope*  $P$ ' is true iff  $P$  is true in the world of the *Star Wars* fiction limited to the spatiotemporal segment of the world *Hope* is concerned with. Given that Luke is Vader's son in the *Star Wars* world, Luke is Vader's son in the earlier portion of that world which is the subject matter of *Hope*. It is not as if Luke is not Vader's son until later on in this world. But given that Luke doesn't visit Yoda until a later time, (27) is false, since Luke does not visit Yoda until later on in this world.

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Having outlined an invariantist treatment of the data, in the following sections I consider two objections to this account

## 7. No Maximal Fiction

The above invariantist proposal tacitly assumed that a given fictional episode is part of single maximal fiction. But this assumption can fail. First, a fictional episode need not be part of a single *maximal* fiction. It could be that for each fictional episode in a series, there is a later one. What should the invariantist say about such cases? In the case where P is true according to the fictional series from some point onwards, the invariantist should say that an utterance of 'P' is correct. So instead of saying that an utterance of P concerning a fictional episode E is correct iff P is true according to the maximal fiction of which E is a part, the invariantist should say instead say that this utterance is correct iff there is some fiction F of which E is a part, according to which, P, and for any fiction F\* of which E is a part such that it is not the case that according to F\*, P, then F\* is a proper part of F. But what if there is no point from which P is true onwards? Well then the correctness condition predicts that there is no correct thing to say. But this doesn't seem especially problematic. In such a case our judgements as to what is correct will not be stable, and the invariantist says this reflects the fact that there is nothing stable to aim at.

Second, a fictional episode will not be part of a *single* maximal fiction when an episode has two sequels neither of which are sequels of the other. To deal with such branching serial fictions a modicum of context-sensitivity is called for. If a single branch of which the fictional episode is particularly salient, then what governs the correctness of an utterance is what is true according to the maximal fiction of the contextually salient branch. If branch A is salient in your context, and branch B salient in my context, then if you say P and I say not P it

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seems that we are not disagreeing, but are instead talking past one another.<sup>19</sup> This is precisely what this contextualist position predicts.

If two or more branches are contextually salient, however, this appeal to contextualism doesn't help. One obvious approach would be to supervaluate across the branches. This yields the result that an utterance is correct iff it is true according to all maximal branches, false iff it is false according to all maximal branches, and is otherwise indeterminate. Another approach would be to subvaluate and replace the definite article in the analysis with an indefinite one: an utterance of 'P' is correct (incorrect) iff it is true (false) according to at least one maximal branch. Of course such an approach would allow an utterance of 'P' to be correct and also an utterance of '~P' to be correct. This result is mitigated by the fact that it does not license a correct utterance of 'P&~P'.

In any case, any explanation of McGonigal's data also has to address the case of branching fictions. And as one cannot assume that a context of utterance or assessment will determine a unique branch, contextualists and relativists have to contemplate supervaluation, subvaluation and other approaches. In this way, then, branching fictions differ from the branching worlds picture of future contingents. On such a picture of temporal reality, whilst there are many forward branches at a time, there is only a single backward branch at a time. But as we have seen this need not be the case with serial fiction.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This is why I invoke contextualism rather than relativism.

<sup>20</sup> As well as branching, serial fictions can also merge, with two distinct fictional series being succeeded by a single fictional episode. Such possibilities raise issues when we consider past tense claims such as 'Luke used to live on Tatooine'. Such a claim may be true on one branch of a serial fiction but not another. Whichever option one favours for dealing with forward branching can presumably also be applied to such backward branching cases.

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Finally, the assumption that any given fictional episode is part of a single maximal fiction can fail in both of the previous ways simultaneously. But such a double failure does not seem to raise any especial problem not raised by the individual failures discussed above.

## **8. Eternalism vs Relativism**

The above invariantist account assumes that there are eternalist truths *now* about how the maximal fiction, of which a particular episode is a part, will go. If there are no such facts, then none of the utterances of (5) will come out as true, since, at best, it is indeterminate whether according to [what will be] the maximal *Star Wars* fiction, Luke is Vader's son. But such a result does not accord with our intuitive verdicts on Young Girl's and Adult Woman's utterances of (5). It is for this reason, then, that adopting a relativist approach towards future contingents, such as MacFarlane's (2014), is of no help in solving McGonigal's puzzle.

McGonigal objects that the invariantist thus presupposes a controversial semantics, according to which there are truths concerning what future episodes of fictions will be like. Further, McGonigal takes it to be "methodologically uncomfortable to have to take a stand on such matters in order to account for what is going on in soap operas and comic books" (McGonigal 2013: 169).

It is not clear that McGonigal himself is entitled to this objection, since he seems to think that there are truths about the future. In particular, he claims (2013: 166) that in 1977

28. It will turn out that Luke is Darth's son



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is true, albeit a lucky guess. But this is precisely the attitude the invariantist takes to (5). In any case, it seems that the relativist would do better to deny that (28), since combined with the falsity of (5) in 1977, (28) yields the abominable conjunction it is not the case that Luke is Darth's son, but it will turn out that Luke is Darth's son! (Compare, Smith is not the murderer, but it will turn out that he is.) The fact that McGonigal was so ready to sign up to the truth of (28), however, reveals how easily eternalist thinking comes to us.

To return to the objection, we can concede that the weaker the assumptions a theory has to make, the stronger it is, whilst maintaining that there is no reason why an invariantist should not appeal to what she takes to be the best semantics of time in order to explain McGonigal's data. Moreover, she may take McGonigal's data to be some of what a semantics of time needs to explain: for the eternalist, serial fictions are just another source of future contingents. And this is reflected by the fact that the patterning one finds in cases of standard future contingents, such as in the baseball example of §6, is the same as one finds in the case of our assessment of utterances of (5). The eternalist, but not the relativist, has a uniform explanation of the two, and what is more, the eternalist's semantic framework is simpler.

Further, it is not as if the nonindexical relativist does not have commitments of her own. Wright (2008) argues that the relativist is committed to either saying that the content of (5) is non-representational, or else that there is not a unique actual world, for the facts that constitute the actual world change over time in virtue of the facts that constitute the fictional world changing over time. Relatedly, Wright (2008: 161) notes that for the relativist whether (5) is true depends not only on what it says and how the world is, but also "on who judges it and their state at the point of judgement". But such a commitment runs counter to our intuitive picture of truth.

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The invariantist and the relativist, then, each take on commitments when explaining McGonigal's data. I have argued that the invariantist account set out above can account for the data at least as well as McGonigal's relativism, and so serial fictions do not present a compelling case for truth relativism. If there are no truths about future contingents, then fictional relativism is a possibility, but note that fictional relativism does not address the issues raised by such an open future in general. But if there are truths about future contingents, then relativism is unnecessary. Moreover, since McGonigal's case seems on all fours with the cases discussed in §6, we should expect a similar treatment of them. This the invariantist provides. What is more, from the invariantist perspective, unplanned serial fiction, planned serial fiction, and non-serial fiction (see n8) are all of a piece and are to be treated with the same invariantist correctness conditions given in §6. There is, then, a pleasing uniformity to invariantism.<sup>21</sup>

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