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**Review of John MacFarlane. (2014). *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. pp.335.**

John MacFarlane’s book is an articulation, application and defense of an original form of relativism: assessment-sensitivity relativism. It is well-structured, meticulous and lucidly written and aspires to rehabilitate relativism as a serious philosophical option about a number of long-standing philosophical problems (from taste predicates to knowledge, modals and future contingents). The book makes for a tremendous read due to its novelty, wide scope, erudition and argumentative power.

MacFarlane carefully lays out the foundational commitments of the theory within philosophy of language (semantics, propositions, truth etc.) and offers a broad, relativist picture of the workings of language in various domains. In this dual way he combines sensitivity to stipulation and clarification of the fundamentals of the theory with the explanatory task of the application of the theory to various domains. The upshot is a synoptic picture of assessment-sensitivity semantics and its application to various domains of language usage. It is an impressive philosophical achievement.

In what follows, I outline the contents of the book and raise some questions about the rejection of skeptical invariantism about knowledge. The book is brimming of interesting arguments and insights, but due to space restrictions we have to confine ourselves to this much of discussion.

The book is structured around three parts: the introductory chapter 1, Part I Foundations (Chs.2-6) and Part II Applications (Chs.7-12). The introductory chapter 1 offers some initial motivation for looking for a novel theory of taste predicates. MacFarlane initially presents the taste predicates puzzle, explains the various desiderata for an adequate theory of taste predicates and argues that no extant major theory (objectivism, contextualism, expressivism) seems to account for all desiderata. He concludes with the suggestion that a fresh look is called for and that this could be provided by the theory of assessment-sensitivity relativism. The suggestion is subsequently substantiated in Ch.7.

Part I Foundations introduces some standard objections to relativism (Ch.2), deems them unconvincing and lays out the foundations of assessment-sensitivity relativism (Chs. 3-6) by stipulating its fundamental commitments within philosophy of language (semantics, propositions, truth etc.). Ch.2 presents standards objections to relativism (such as the self-refutation objection, challenges from disagreement, propositions, truth and the equivalence schema) and shows that these objections, although significant, are not ‘knock-down’ objections. MacFarlane undertakes in the next four chapters (Chs.3-6) to introduce a relativist theory that cannot only address the canvassed standard objections but also reap explanatory fruit where alternative theories face problems.

Ch.3 broaches the theory of assessment-sensitivity relativism. To characterize assessment-sensitivity relativism, MacFarlane (2014:60) distinguishes between ‘contexts of use’ and ‘contexts of assessment’ of a sentence. Roughly, contexts of use are the contexts wherein a sentence is used while contexts of assessment are the contexts from within a used sentence is assessed. MacFarlane (2014:67) argues that it is the introduction of a neglected context of assessment that makes a theory distinctively relativist (and not contextualist). This is the case because, according to assessment-sensitivity theory, assessment is relative to the standards of the assessor and failing to distinguish between contexts of use and context of assessment is bound to miss relativist assessment-sensitivity. As he says (2014:62), ‘‘there is no ‘correct’ context from which to assess a speech act’’.

A simple example would help clarify the basics of the position. Suppose Andreas asserts: ‘Licorice is tasty’. Trivially, this is true for Andreas at the time and context of use. But for Betsy, at a time and context of assessment, it is false because relative to her own standards of taste it is not the case that ‘Licorice is tasty’. Betsy detests licorice. Thus, assessment is sensitive to the assessor’s standards (aesthetic, moral, epistemic, taste etc.), which are not ‘correct’ in any absolutist sense.

After the introduction of assessment-sensitivity relativism, MacFarlane undertakes in Chs. 4, 5 & 6 to introduce assessment-sensitive accounts of fundamental concepts within philosophy of language, namely, propositions, truth and disagreement. In so doing, the account revisits the standard objections to relativism presented in Ch.2 and underwrites that not only they are inconclusive, but a coherent account of some plausibility of relativist propositions, truth and disagreement can be provided by assessment-sensitivity theory.

Ch.4 sketches a theory of propositions coherent with assessment-sensitivity. The idea is that assessment-sensitive sentences express themselves assessment-sensitive propositions. That is, propositions true relative to some assessor but not true relative to some other assessor due to a difference in standards. As a result, propositions ‘can vary in truth-value from one context of assessment to another’ (2014:73). He calls the view ‘truth-value relativism’.

Ch.5 explores a relativist account of truth coherent with assessment-sensitivity. The question of a relativist truth is ‘the hardest question’ for the relativist because it threatens the very coherence of relativism (2014:97). MacFarlane argues that assessment-sensitive relative truth is coherent with the truth norm of assertion. We can assert propositions and they might be assessment-sensitive relative truths and there is nothing incoherent with the possibility. He also explains how assessment-sensitivity relativism can better explain retraction than nonindexical contextualism that does not postulate a distinct context of assessment (2014:108-110). Of course, conceptual coherence is one thing and support from linguistic evidence another, and MacFarlane modestly indicates that his account only clears the ground for a less biased against relativism consideration of the linguistic evidence.

Ch. 6 offers an account of disagreement coherent with assessment-sensitivity. MacFarlane (2014:119) argues that it is ‘the wrong question’ to ask ‘What is *real* disagreement?’ because it is a question tendentious towards objectivism and this is unfair to both the relativist and the contextualist. Instead, we should be asking ‘What kinds of disagreement are there?’. He perceptively distinguishes between various kinds of disagreement, such as noncotenability, preclusion of joint satisfaction, preclusion of joint accuracy, and preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy. He argues that relativism saves preclusion of joint accuracy, which is the kind of disagreement to be saved because it steers through noncotenability, which is too weak a conception of disagreement, and joint reflexive accuracy, which is too strong a conception.

Part II Applications applies the theory to taste predicates (Ch.7), knowledge (Ch.8), future contingents (Ch.9) and modals such as might (Ch.10) and ought (Ch.11) and concludes with some discussion of the rationality of assessment-sensitivity relativism (Ch.12).

Ch.7 offers an assessment-sensitive solution to the taste predicates puzzle introduced in Ch.1. It is argued that the assessment-sensitive solution to the problem accounts for various desiderata more adequately than the alternatives of objectivism, contextualism and expressivism. For instance, unlike objectivism it is not dogmatic and chauvinistic and, unlike contextualism and expressivism, it explains disagreement and retraction better. Ch.8 applies assessment-sensitivity relativism to knowledge discourse. Again, it is argued that the theory fares better than major alternatives such as contextualism, subject-sensitive invariantism, skepticism and expressivism. For instance, unlike contextualism, for assessment-sensitivity there is no problem of lost disagreement, and unlike subject-sensitive invariantism, there is no problem with embeddings of ‘know’ in modal and temporal constructions.

Ch.9 applies assessment-sensitivity relativism to the problem of future contingents. That is, the problem of accounting for the meaning of contingent statements about the future, such as ‘Johny will be travelling tomorrow’. Once again, MacFarlane argues that assessment-sensitivity relativism explains various desiderata for a theory of future contingents in an overall plausible way. Chs. 10 & 11 give modals ‘might’ and ‘ought’ the assessment-sensitive treatment. Ch. 10 argues once more that assessment-sensitivity can exploit the distinction between context of use and context of assessment in order to offer a more plausible understanding of ‘might’ discourse than alternatives (such as solipsistic contextualism, expressivism). Ch.11 argues that an assessment-sensitivity treatment of ‘ought’ captures what is plausible from standard objective and subjective understandings of ‘ought’ without being either subjectivist or objectivist, which are individually problematic for independent reasons.

Finally, in Ch.12 MacFarlane addresses an objection concerning the very rationality of the position. He examines the objection that it is irrational to assert a proposition in a context of use while being aware that in a later context of assessment you will have to retract the very same proposition (if your standard of assessment shifts, which is open, according to the theory). MacFarlane argues that there is no irrationality is asserting propositions that one expects to retract later on in a different context and offers a speculative ‘just so story’ of how we might have come to assert and retract propositions in the manner assessment-sensitivity stipulates. He suggests that it would have been efficient to assert propositions that we are aware that we can retract as mistaken later on (due to a change of relativist perspective) because it would be cognitively less burdensome (in terms of memory storage and representation of standards).

This much concludes a very rough outline of the book that, admittedly, does no justice to its richness and complexity. But I hope the outline is stimulating enough to urge interested parties to read the book in order to appreciate its full content.

I raise now some questions about the discussion of knowledge. As we have seen, in Ch.8 MacFarlane applies the theory of assessment-sensitivity relativism to knowledge discourse. He rejects alternatives such as contextualism, expressivism, skeptical invariantism, Moorean invariantism (‘i.e. ‘dogmatism’) and subject-sensitive invariantism as explanatorily less fruitful than assessment sensitivity. But I would like to play devil’s advocate on behalf of the skeptic. The case for skeptical invariantism is quickly introduced and set aside as unpromising, which is not atypical in knowledge debates, but I think such cursory treatments do not do justice to the resourcefulness and resilience of the position.

I argue below that skeptical invariantism can, in principle, respond to the argument offered against it and, moreover, can account in a simple and neat way for puzzling phenomena such as (genuine or deep) disagreement about knowledge and retraction. My aim is modest: to show that the argument against skeptical invariantism is not conclusive and that the position might even have some attractions, which is not to say that MacFarlane would have denied this much. To suggest this much, it is only to indicate that although skeptical invariantism is prima facie counter-intuitive, it is a resourceful position worthy of serious exploration.

MacFarlane (2014:179) argues against the skeptic who holds that ‘although most of the knowledge claims we make are strictly speaking false, it is reasonable to make them nonetheless’.[[1]](#footnote-1) He points out that ‘…we don’t regard ourselves as exaggerating or ‘’only speaking loosely’’ when we make ordinary knowledge claims, like ‘’I know that I have two dollars in my pockets’. If we did, he goes on, we would have a reason to be swayed by the skeptical position, but we are not and therefore we have no such reason. He concludes that this is evidence that the case for skepticism is unpromising.

MacFarlane’s argument from semantic introspection is, of course, not conclusive.[[2]](#footnote-2) First, Macfarlane seems to reject skeptical invariantism because it is incongruent with how ordinary speakers use and understand the meaning of ‘know’. That is, ordinary speakers use and understand ‘know’ as if there is a lot of knowledge and he assumes that a plausible theory of knowledge should respect this ordinary epistemic appearance. Yet this seems to assume that ordinary speaker’s semantic introspection is reliable, or at least reliable in the specific case of ‘know’. Perhaps we should be charitable enough to grant that the Moorean epistemic appearance about ‘know’ should be the default position, unless we have good reasons to doubt this appearance. But even so, we might have good reasons to doubt the Moorean epistemic appearance.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Second, MacFarlane seems to be thinking that just because we do not ordinarily think that we speak loosely with ‘know’ that we *should not* think that we speak loosely with ‘know’. But in reminiscence of Hume’s Law (i.e. is\ought point), this follows only if we assume a methodological, normative principle that requires that we save ordinary epistemic appearances and, as we just noted above, it is dubious whether such a normative principle is correct. If we have reasons to doubt and even disrespect ordinary appearances for the sake of overall explanatory power, then it seems that we have good reason to trump the default incentive to ‘save appearances’.

This happens often in science (e.g. theory of evolution about teleological appearances etc.) and some have argued that it should happen in some philosophical debates as well (e.g. error theorists about moral facts appearances, or hard determinists about free will appearances).[[4]](#footnote-4) Besides, we are all familiar with cases of unreliable ordinary semantic introspection. Ordinary speakers tend, for instance, to think that dolphins are fish, tomatoes are a vegetable or that physical time is absolute, while our best biological and physical theories suggest otherwise. It follows that we should not lay so much importance on ordinary semantic introspection (and related appearances). In light of independent reasons, it might turn out that ordinary semantic introspection (and related appearances) is unreliable. Hence, the argument from semantic introspection is not conclusive against skeptical invariantism, which is not to imply that MacFarlane thought it conclusive.

Third, a case could be made that although ordinary speakers do not take themselves to ‘speak loosely’ with ‘know’ and do claim to know a lot of things, when exposed to skeptical arguments they are far less sure about their knowledge presumptions. This is mere speculation, but it has some backing from the experience of teaching skeptical arguments to undergraduates. Their pre-theoretical Moorean intuitions about knowledge seem considerably shaken after being exposed to skeptical arguments, such as Descartes’ evil Demon, the Agrippan trilemma, or Humean skepticism about induction. This seems to indicate that if we eventually *should* think that we speak loosely with ‘know’ and that we do not really know as much, we are psychologically capable of being swayed by skeptical arguments -even if Hume was right that the grip of such arguments can only hold as long as we are in reflection in our study room (cf. Kyriacou (forthcoming)).

It is of course contentious, to say the least, whether skeptical invariantism can provide us with independent theoretical reasons to doubt and even disrespect the Moorean epistemic appearance that we know a lot. But I propose that skeptical invariantism can at least offer us an interesting picture of two puzzling phenomena that MacFarlane pays particular attention to, namely, disagreement about knowledge attributions and retraction of assertions. I cannot afford to delve into a detailed comparison between the sketched explanation and the assessment-sensitivity explanation, although I hint where the skeptical explanation might have the upper hand in some respect.

When two speakers S1, S2, disagree about whether ‘S3 knows that p’, they prima facie genuinely disagree about the truth of the attribution ‘S3 knows that p’. S1, say, asserts the attribution and S2 asserts its negation. By the principle of excluded middle, it is a necessary truth that one is right the other is wrong. Following some simple skeptical account of knowledge for the sake of exposition, we can stipulate that knowledge requires conclusive justification that eliminates all possibility of error.[[5]](#footnote-5) Otherwise, we do not really know (and the upshot is that we know little because we can rarely satisfy such a stringent standard of knowledge). This is a moderate, Cartesian version for skeptical invariantism because it accepts a robust knowledge relation, although denies that we satisfy it as often as we think we satisfy it.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So we can evaluate whether S1 or S2 is right by reference to this Cartesian account of knowledge. S3 knows that p iff S3 bases his belief on conclusive justification that eliminates all possibility of error. We can then assess if S1’s attribution ‘S3 knows that p’ is true or S2’s assertion of its negation is true. That is, we can examine whether S3 satisfies the knowledge relation in regard to p or not. If the available evidence suggests that he does, then S1 is likely to be right, otherwise S2 is likely to be right.

The account is simple and neat and has some attractions. First, it holds across contexts and unlike contextualism it does not entail that S1 (or S2) might be right about the attribution in some contexts but not in some others (by the same justification). Either they are right across contexts (by the same justification) or they do not because the standard of knowledge is invariant (and intellectualist). In the same vein, there is no so-called ‘problem of lost disagreement’ for skeptical invariantism as there is for contextualism. This is the case because it cannot be that in some context S1 knows (by the same justification) that ‘S3 knows that p’ but in some other context some other person S4 (by the same justification) does not know that ‘S3 knows that p’ (due to a contextual fluctuation of the standards of knowledge) and *both* S1 and S4 are right relative to their contexts.[[7]](#footnote-7) In such a case, S1 and S4 really disagree and by classical logic only one of them can be (and is) right. Disagreement, in a robust sense, is saved.

Second, it is an account that accommodates genuine (or deep) disagreement and not any other less robust phenomenon of disagreement, such as expressivist conflict of noncognitive attitudes (i.e. Stevensonian ‘disagreement in attitude’) that MacFarlane (2014:123) calls ‘preclusion of joint satisfaction’, or mere preclusion of joint accuracy disagreement as in assessment-sensitivity relativism. It saves the appearance that disagreement about knowledge attribution is robust, genuine disagreement (i.e. MacFarlane’s ‘preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy’ disagreement) and not a less full-blooded kind of disagreement.

This is important because other contenders (e.g. expressivism) have to settle with a less robust account of disagreement and it is debatable whether less robust accounts of disagreement do not miss (or ‘denigrate’) the phenomenon of disagreement (as suggested by ordinary epistemic appearances). Indeed, assessment-sensitive relativism itself only saves preclusion of joint accuracy disagreement and not what MacFarlane (2014) calls ‘preclusion of joint reflexive disagreement’ that seems the more robust phenomenon of disagreement. To be sure, MacFarlane (2014:137) thinks that the question of genuine disagreement is merely ‘terminological’ and that the very question is ‘wrong’ (2014:119), but this seems skewed against the objectivist account of moderate skeptical invariantism.

The skeptical account can also fairly easily account for retraction of assertions. Suppose that S1 was mistaken to assert that ‘S3 knows that p’ because S3’s justification does not eliminate all not-p possibilities and S1 could and should, given his epistemic position, have realized this much. Upon realization, S1 should, if rational, retract his assertion because it is mistaken that ‘S3 knows that p’.

The explanation would go along broadly Humean lines: in ordinary life we tend to ‘speak loosely’ and unwittingly assert that we know propositions that we do not really know (e.g. Davis (2007), Bonjour (2010)).[[8]](#footnote-8) This happens because we have a natural, Humean tendency to seek strong enough evidence to make a proposition safe, that is, to seek strong enough evidence that renders the proposition not easily mistaken (cf. Kyriacou (forthcoming)). But this evidence is not typically strong enough to eliminate all not-p possibilities and render p conclusive and an instance of knowledge. On reflection, we can realize this and retract assertions.

Thus, we tend to take into consideration only possibilities of error that in the context we deem relevant and sufficient to render p safe, and not possibilities of error we deem far-fetched and irrelevant to p’s safety. It just happens, however, that sometimes our ordinary assertions of safe knowledge are shown not to be instances of knowledge. Perhaps they are proven false after all, or that on philosophical grounds we come to realize that we do not really know unless all possibility of error has been eliminated. When we realize this, we acknowledge the mistake and retract the assertion because it is mistaken.

Again, this is an account of retraction that is simple and neat and has some attractions. First, unlike contextualism, retraction is explainable in terms of the MacFarlane distinction between context of use and context of assessment. We tend to assert that p on the basis of ‘safety knowledge’ but in reflective contexts of assessment we can assess that safety is not sufficient for knowledge and therefore retract the assertion as mistaken. So the distinction between context of use and context assessment is heeded and assessment-sensitivity is no better in this respect.

Second, unlike assessment-sensitivity relativism, it does not suggest that retraction is relative to the standards of the assessor at the context of assessment. This is important on two grounds. On the one hand, because it might be the case that the standard of the assessor is anything from arbitrary to idiosyncratic (e.g. she could reject the factivity condition). Instead, in skeptical invariantism the standard that should regulate retraction by an assessor is not sensitive to the assessor and, therefore, there is no danger of any ‘standards arbitrariness’. Besides, the factivity condition is a necessary condition for knowledge, but it does not seem an assessment-sensitive relative truth. It is prima facie an assessment-*in*sensitive non-relative truth because even if in a hypothetical scenario all assessors rejected the condition, it would, intuitively, still be true.[[9]](#footnote-9)

On the other hand, it is important because if we disagree about our assessment of the theory of assessment-sensitive relativism *itself*, our disagreement is prima facie genuine disagreement (i.e. ‘preclusion of reflexive joint accuracy disagreement’) as in the account sketched above. There is non-relative truth about the matter and one of us is right, the other is wrong.

Of course, MacFarlane could easily respond that we can still disagree about assessment-sensitivity relativism without the disagreement being particularly genuine or deep (that is, we could have preclusion of joint accuracy disagreement). For one thing, truth is assessment-sensitive and two different assessors may have different truth standards. I concede that assessment-sensitivity relativism has an obvious response, but the skeptical account can at least save the appearance of genuine disagreement, in accordance with ordinary epistemic appearances. Assessment-sensitivity relativism cannot save this appearance and must abide by a more revisionary account of disagreement.

Third, suppose I assert assessment-sensitivity theory. By the theory’s own lights, in a later context of assessment I could think that the theory is mistaken and retract my assertion because the standards of assessment are always relative to the assessor.[[10]](#footnote-10) This might not seem a particularly disturbing implication because non-dogmatic theories should allow for this much. But it creates a dilemma for assessment-sensitivity relativism in particular.

Upon retraction, either we would take assessment-sensitivity theory to be false due to relative standards or false due to non-relative standards. If we take it to be false due to relative standards, then the theory would be self-defeating. It would give us reasons to think it false by its own lights. If we take it to be false due to non-relative standards, then the theory would be false by stipulation. It would give us reasons to think it false as stipulated. Either way, the theory is in trouble when retraction is applied to the theory itself; and the theory cannot deny availability for such retraction because it would then lapse into dogmatism.

In contrast, moderate skeptical invariantism would seem to be in a better position to account for retraction as applied to itself. It would suggest that we have good reasons to believe that there is an absolute standard of knowledge, but accept that these reasons are not conclusive. In the event that reasons against the theory are found stronger, we could retract the theory in virtue of non-relative standards of theory choice, such as explanatory power.

To sum up, the discussion above supports the assertion that skeptical invariantism is not refuted by MacFarlane’s argument from semantic introspection and that it might even have some interesting things to say in regard to disagreement about knowledge and retraction.

In conclusion, MacFarlane’s book is a profound and fascinating book highly recommended to any philosopher interested in philosophy of language, formal semantics, epistemology, metaethics and beyond. It will serve as a springboard for future work both about relativism, as well as particular domains of application.

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1. He cites Schaffer (2004) and Davis (2007) as such skeptics. For other recent defenses of a skeptical position see Bonjour (2010) and Kyriacou (forthcoming). MacFarlane (2005:206) presents a similar argument against skeptical invariantism in his exposition of the assessment-sensitivity theory of knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For similar arguments against skeptical invariantism see Hawthorne (2004:104), MacFarlane (2005:206), Blome-Tillman (2013:4298-4305) and Dinges (2015:2588-92). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, Bonjour (2010) and Kyriacou (forthcoming) have argued that skeptical invariantism can account for long standing problems for fallibilism, such as the value of knowledge, the lottery paradox, the Gettier problem, the dogmatism paradox, concessive knowledge attributions and more. This explanatory promise might offer us some reason to offer skeptical invariantism at least hearing. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Actually, MacFarlane (2014:237) makes a similar methodological point against Lewis’ rejection of ‘branching’ of the future: ‘If we have to choose between what science tells us about the world and coherence of our ordinary talk, it seems we should plump for science…’. So, he would accept the drawn methodological point. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This amounts to what MacFarlane (2014:67) calls ‘absolutist postsemantics’. That is, ‘A sentence S is true at a context c iff S is true at c, <Wc, SG>, where Wc is the world of c and SG is God’s [knowledge] standard’. Of course, for McFarlane ‘God’ is a rather figurative way of saying ‘absolute’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thus, it is unlike the radical skeptical invariantism of Unger (1975) and Fogelin (1994) that seems in Pyrrhonist style to deny that there is *any* knowledge (even of the assertion i*tself*). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The problem of lost disagreement is a problem that has plagued contextualism from its early days, see DeRose (1992) for some discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As Hawthorne (2004:133-4) has noted, a skeptical invariantist theory should supply us with a plausible account of assertion and practical reasoning. Given that the knowledge norm of assertion and practical reasoning is plausible, a theory that denies much of knowledge would have no easy task in giving an account of assertion and practical reasoning. I attempt elsewhere to develop an account along the lines implicit in the sketched account of retraction. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. MacFarlane (2014) could respond that it is an assessment-sensitive truth that assessors tend to accept. But to my mind this does not capture the prima facie mind-independence of the factivity condition. For my part, I would be inclined to think that it is an epistemic conceptual truth. If some are inclined on reflection to resist the status, I would suggest that they are ‘meta-conceptually deficient’. I explore this phenomenon in regard to reflective resistance to *moral* conceptual truths in Kyriacou (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Assessment-sensitivity allows that it is rational to assert ordinary propositions that it is expected, given assessment-sensitivity, to retract later on in a context of assessment. MacFarlane (2014) defends this feature of his theory in Ch.12. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)