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AGAINST RELATIVISM

ABSTRACT. Recent years have brought relativistic accounts of knowledge, first-person belief, and future contingents to prominence. I discuss these views, distinguish non-trivial from trivial forms of relativism, and then argue against relativism in all of its substantive varieties.

For a period of time, relativistic doctrines of truth had no vocal advocates within the analytic philosophical community; but the last several years have marked a change. David Lewis (1979a) began the trend by arguing for a relativistic account of first-person beliefs, the kind of belief to which a person gives voice with a use of 'I', 'me' or a synonymous expression. Lewis called such beliefs *de se*, and argued that a single de se belief is often true relative to one of its possessors and false relative to another within a single possible world.[1] More recently, John MacFarlane (2003) has claimed that contingent "assertions" about the future can be true relative to one "point of assessment" and false relative to another. Now Mark Richard (2004) argues that "claims" expressed with gradable adjectives demand relativistic treatment, and MacFarlane and Richard both advocate relativist accounts of assertions or claims of knowledge. My purpose here is to distinguish substantive forms of relativism from their insubstantial cousins and to argue against relativism in all of its substantive incarnations.

Of course, a fully adequately response to the above authors would involve a defense of non-relativistic accounts of first-person belief, future contingents, and knowledge; and no single paper could hope to effectively accomplish this task. Thus, I will admit at the start that for all I will

argue here, it might be that substantive relativism, though problematic, is nevertheless the best account that can be given of these complex matters. But I am firmly convinced that the costs of relativism are so high that this cannot be right. In this case, the fire is significantly hotter than the frying pan.

I proceed as follows: In section1, I argue that a substantive form of relativism would have to claim that a single proposition can have more than one truth-value at a given possible world; I then go on, in section 2, to set the stage for an evaluation of this position by offering an account of propositionhood that does not beg the question against the relativist. In section 3, I argue that there are indeed relatively true meanings that we grasp in virtue of understanding sentences ''out of context''; but I also develop a thought experiment designed to show that we cannot endorse or believe the entities in question. (I take this thought experiment to provide a strong but inconclusive case against cognitive forms of relativism.) In sections 4–8, I address the particular relativistic doctrines described above and develop a form of argument that applies to them all: If we grasp the relativist's semantics, we can only believe the propositions to which it is supposed to apply on pain of gross irrationality. Relativism entails that we are grossly irrational or that we don't understand the things that we believe. I conclude these arguments in section 9 by addressing a limited ''linguistic'' form of relativism that concedes that the objects of our beliefs have absolute truth-values but nevertheless insists that some of the things that we assert are only relatively true.

1. WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO BE RELATIVE TO WHAT?

Before we can criticize relativism, we need to have a better sense of that doctrine. Clearly, the relativist says that the truth of x is relative to the truth of y. But the values of 'x' and 'y' matter here. It is entirely uncontroversial that the truth of some things is relative to some other things, and

assertion of an uncontroversial relativity does not deserve the name 'relativism'.

First, consider lexical ambiguity. Let us assume, for the sake of exposition, that some sentences are ambiguous. Then a single sentence can be true relative to one disambiguation and false relative to another. 'Banks are fine picnic areas' is true relative to banks = riverbanks, and false relative to banks = financial institutions. So there are some entities that are obviously true relative to one parameter and false relative to another.[2]

Something similar is true of unambiguous, indexical-involving sentences. 'I am happy' is not simply true or false. Rather, 'I am happy' is true relative to a context that supplies Winnie the Pooh as the referent of 'I' and it is false relative to a context that supplies Eyore as its referent. ('I am happy' is used to express a truth when Pooh assertively utters it, but it is used to express a falsehood when Eyore assertively utters it.) Just as an ambiguous sentence (or quasi-sentence) may be true relative to one disambiguation and false relative to another, an indexical-involving sentence may be true when context supplies one set of values for its indexicals and false when it supplies another. This trivial fact about indexicality surely does not entail relativism in any interesting sense.

One might think that while it is uncontroversial that a *sentence* can be true relative to one indexical-value-assignment or disambiguation and false relative to another, positing the merely relative truth of a *token utterance* surely is controversial.[3] But the effective use of double entendre suggests otherwise. Suppose that after Max drinks himself into unconsciousness, his buddies cover him in plaster and let it harden. The next day, Max relates the night's events to his father and concludes his account by saying, ''I really got plastered,'' intending his statement to express a double entendre. What has Max said? One option is that he expresses the conjunctive proposition that he drank to the point of intoxication and was covered in plaster. Another

option is that Max's utterance is elliptical; what he really said was that he was plastered in more than one sense of 'plastered'. But a third option is that Max produces a single token utterance that expresses two propositions: (1) that he got intoxicated, and (2) that he was covered in plaster.[4] Suppose that (contrary to fact) Max has misremembered the incident, and though right in thinking he was covered in plaster, he is mistaken in thinking he got intoxicated. A common intuition is that what Max says is neither entirely false nor entirely true in such a circumstance. Rather, one of the things he says is true while the other is false. Of the three options here considered, only the third renders this verdict.

But the question for the relativist is not whether this third option provides the best account of successful uses of double entendre, but whether it yields *relativism* in any substantive sense. I suggest that this account should not be described as relativism because it sill allows that *propositions* are absolutely true or false, not true or false relative to some parameter. A truth-relativism that would deserve its name would have to claim that a proposition can be both true relative to parameter e (at a possible world w) and false relative to parameter e* (at the same w). My aim in what follows is to argue against relativism so conceived.

One item of clarification, however, before the argument begins in earnest: The proposition that grass is green is contingent; though true, it might have been false – its falsity is metaphysically possible. We can put this by saying that grass is green, but there are ways the world might have been, and possible ways for the world to be, such that it would not have been, and would not be, that grass is green. If we allow that these ways are possibilities, or (more graphically) possible worlds, we can then say that though it is true that grass is green, there are worlds in which this is not true. Nevertheless, I will claim, there are no parameters x and y, and no single possible world w, such that it is true that grass is green in w relative to x, and not true that grass is green in w relative to y. If you want, I claim that the truth of a proposition is

always relative to a possible world, but that it is relative to nothing else.[5] Clearly, this is not substantive relativism – it simply acknowledges that the division between what is true and what isn't true depends on how things are, while (in many cases) things needn't be (and needn't have been) as they are. For ease of exposition I will put this by saying that propositions are *absolutely* true or false rather than *relatively* true and false, and trust that those who only relativize proposition-truth to a possible world countenance nothing but the absolute truth.

2. WHAT IS A PROPOSITION SUCH THAT ITS TRUTH MIGHT BE RELATIVE?

One might think that framing the debate in terms of propositions threatens to turn a substantive debate into a call for linguistic legislation. Isn't 'proposition' just a term of art? If it is, isn't the relativist free to define 'proposition' in such a way that propositions turn out to be relatively true? No. 'Proposition' is not a term of art. Abraham Lincoln was neither a semanticist nor an analytic philosopher, and he began his inspirational dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery with, "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Our question then is this: might it be that the proposition to which Lincoln said this nation was dedicated is in fact true relative to one person, place, or standard, but false relative to something else?

In other words, because 'proposition' has a life outside of philosophy, we can combat substantive relativism by arguing that an accurate semantics for 'proposition' – as this expression is used by non-philosophers whether in Lincoln's time or our own – demands a non-relative treatment of the truth of propositions. Our intuitions about the truth-values of sentences involving 'proposition' would provide the basic data for such an approach.[6]

Alternatively, we might focus on technical usage of 'proposition'. Semanticists treat propositions as structured entities that determine sets of possible worlds (or as the very sets themselves), and they identify the truth of a proposition at a world w with w's being a member of the set the proposition determines (or the set with which the proposition is identified). Thus, the most fruitful technical discourse to date treats the truth of a proposition as a non-relative matter. A pragmatist might argue that this is reason enough to eschew truth-relativism.

Finally, a sophisticated attack on relativism might combine these two strategies by arguing that the technical and ordinary uses of 'proposition' are equivalent, or that the later is just a precisification of the former. If this is correct, not only does ordinary usage argue for truth absolutism, this feature of our ordinary use is preserved when we use 'proposition' in our best semantic theorizing.

Though I think these strategies hold some promise, my arguments against relativism will instead focus directly on the *explanatory roles* that propositions play in the philosophy of mind and language. (In fact, I think these roles are to a great extent codified in both common and technical uses of 'proposition', but I will not argue for that point here.) The two roles I will discuss are as follows.

(1) *Linguistic*: A proposition is what a subject succeeds in asserting when she successfully uses a declarative sentence in a particular context; a proposition is the thing asserted when a subject asserts that such and such is the case.[7]
(2) *Cognitive*: A proposition is the thing considered when a subject considers whether some particular thing is true or false, and it is thing that she endorses or believes if she comes to believe the thing she has been considering.

A *meaning skeptic* denies that propositions play the first of these roles. That is, she might allow that there are things that people believe, but she will deny that sentences are used in contexts to assert these things. A *non-relationist* about thought denies that propositions play the second of these

roles. She might allow that we use sentences to assert propositions, but she will then claim that one can occupy a state of belief without therein being related (by belief) to the kind of entity that is fit to serve as the thing asserted. Thus, on this taxonomy, a *non-relationalist meaning skeptic* denies the very existence of propositions.[8] In contrast, a *classical view of propositions* accepts both (1) and (2) and so says that a proposition is the thing asserted when a sentence is used in a context, the very thing someone believes when she understands that sentence on a particular occasion and endorses what it is there and then used to say.

In what follows I will focus on the cognitive role of propositions. Though I will not assume a classical view of propositions, I will assume that there are propositions qua entities considered and believed. After arguing that the truth of these entities must be a non-relative matter, I will present considerations that militate against a view that bifurcates the classical role of propositions. The bifurcationist claims that there is a kind of sentence T such that the thing a T-type sentence is used to assert when a subject utters it in a context is true relative to some x and false relative to some y (in a single world w), whereas the belief to which the subject gives voice in uttering that sentence is true or false simpliciter. According to such a view, what we assert when we use sentences of the relevant type is always considerably weaker than what we believe. When T is an ordinary kind of declarative sentence (and not, say, a question, command or exclamation) the bifurcationist cannot deny that we sometimes *intend* to use T-type sentences to say what we believe. She must therefore argue that we are unable to fulfill this intention – that we cannot use the kind of sentence in question to successfully communicate our thoughts. I will argue that there are systematic reasons for thinking that sentences cannot display this defect. Taken together these arguments establish that relative truth should not be attributed to items that count as propositions in any substantive sense.

3. COGNITIVE RELATIVISM EXPLICATED

Most theorists agree that context can (and often does) affect what sentences are used to say, so that a single sentence can be used to say different things in different contexts. There are arguably two aspects of context that generate such variation: speakers' intentions, and external features of an expression's use that lead competent listeners to understand that expression in a particular way. Some context-sensitive sentences only express judgable contents when they are used with a certain kind of intention or used within a certain external setting. When these aspects of context are not present, we can "see through" to the sentence's context-independent meaning. These context-independent meanings are typically not appropriate objects of belief. In this section I provide a strong prima facie case for this anti-relativistic claim by discussing a particular thought experiment.[9]

Imagine accidentally stumbling into a middle school English classroom, when the teacher, Ms. S, stops class to show you the sentence 'I am happy' written on a chalkboard. She then tells you (if not in so many words) that she has not assertively uttered this sentence nor has she inscribed it in an attempt to report her emotional state. "I've just asked my students to consider the sentence written on the board," she says, "to consider it as an example of an indexical-containing sentence." Here 'I am happy' is not used, it is merely mentioned.

Ms. S now offers you the following bet. After considering all the reasons there are for thinking that the sentence written on the board is *true*, and after weighing the reasons there are for believing what it used *to assert*, form your best judgments on these matters. Do these two things, S promises, and a million dollars is yours.

Clearly, you cannot win the money. But why not? You are kept from the sum by the fact that 'I am happy' doesn't assert anything in these circumstances; there is no proposition to be grasped here and thus nothing to be endorsed. Of course, Ms. S could use 'I am happy' to express the proposition that she is

happy. But because she hasn't used this sentence at all, she hasn't used it for this purpose.[10] When 'I am happy' is merely mentioned, the circumstances surrounding its utterance do not generate a speaker as the referent of 'I'. The explanation for this lies in the fact that the speaker does not intend to use the sentence to express a proposition, and the circumstances fail to provide a competent listener with a way to fix upon a particular proposition as the thing 'I am happy' is used to say in this context.[11]

When Ms. S asks you to consider the sentence written on the chalkboard you fulfill her request by simply focusing on 'I am happy'. Now what happens when you just consider the sentence itself? Does the sentence entirely lack meaning in this case? Should we say that you don't understand the sentence? There are, of course, substantive epistemological questions about when we are justified in supposing that meanings exist. Nevertheless, I will assume that we can use 'meaning' in such a way that when a subject R knows how to use 'I am happy' in a context to say that she is happy and to give voice to her belief that she is happy (when she has this belief and wants to say what she thinks), and when R knows that when some S* assertively utters 'I am happy' S* says that she (S*) is happy, R therein grasps, or most probably grasps, the meaning of this sentence. If we must, we can say that the meaning of 'I am happy' is that thing (whatever it is) that explains how R can do all this; but in saying this we remain neutral as to whether the meaning is something distinct from the relevant linguistic abilities, and whether the meaning is something distinct from the subject's grasp of it. A full blown realist would distinguish all these elements: the meaning of the sentence, one's grasp of it, one's ability to use the sentence appropriately, and the ability to understand what someone says when she uses the sentence. But we can construe the realist as *arguing* that meanings have a significant degree of independence from bouts of cognition and various cognitive abilities, not as defining 'meaning' in such a way that nothing without the suitable independence could be a meaning, and not as just assuming that meanings would have to have the relevant independence to exist.

So we should say that when Ms. S presents you with 'I am happy' you grasp its context-independent meaning, where this is "intimately connected" with your knowing how to arrive at the various propositions it expresses in the various contexts in which it is (or could be) used.[12] Nevertheless, because the meaning you grasp when S mentions 'I am happy' is not the kind of thing that is simply true or simply false, you are prevented from considering the reasons there are for thinking that it is true and making a decision on the matter. You can only judge that the sentence on the board is true relative to certain speaker- (and time-) supplying contexts and false relative to others. Something similar is true of the meaning the sentence possesses in these circumstances. You cannot simply endorse or believe this meaning; you can only believe that it is true in the same "relative-to-a-parameter" way.

Our example of a merely mentioned sentence provides a useful heuristic for getting at context-independent meaning. But this heuristic is imperfect. For while there are circumstances in which a sentence is uttered that do not supply a speaker as the user of that sentence, there are certain features of context that are more difficult to strip away in practice. For example, suppose that instead of 'I am happy', Ms. S has written 'Pooh is happy' on the board. And suppose that 'Pooh' and 'happy' are both univocal – that there is one and only one bear to which 'Pooh' refers and 'happy' expresses a single property (or concept). Can you now walk home with the million? Can you consider this sentence and weigh the reasons for and against thinking that it is true? Can you believe what it says in these circumstances?

Perhaps the answers to these questions are not entirely clear. It is somewhat natural to assume that the time at which you are reading 'Pooh is happy' is the time at which Pooh would have to be happy for the sentence to be true, or that the period of inscription is the relevant time. If you make one of these assumptions you'll consider whether Pooh is happy at the relevant time, form a judgment on this matter and try to collect your money. But if you don't make this assumption, you can only reasonably conclude that the sentence is true

relative to those periods of time at which Pooh is happy and false relative to all others. If you think of the sentence in the later way, you cannot try to figure out whether it is true or false. Nor can you fix on what the sentence says in these circumstances and consider this entity for endorsement or rejection. For suppose that Ms. S tells you that Pooh was happy on Monday, sad on Tuesday, joyous on Wednesday and so on for every day of Pooh's life – she then asks, "Is the sentence 'Pooh is happy' true?" If you're considering the sentence without considering it in relation to one of these days, you still cannot give this question a straight answer. You are similarly unable to consider and judge its meaning in this setting.

So it is unclear whether in our hypothetical example context supplies a time as the correct time with which to interpret 'Pooh is happy'.[13] Let us adopt Nathan Salmon's (1986) terminology and say that even if context does not supply a time, the mentioned sentence 'Pooh is happy' expresses a *proposition matrix*, where this matrix determines a function from times (and perhaps places) to entities that are fit for belief. And let us coin a new term and say that if context does supply a time, the sentence in these circumstances expresses one of the several different *cognitively complete entities (CCE)* in the range of this matrix. If 'Pooh is happy' expresses a matrix in these circumstances, both it and its meaning are true at some times and false at others, and this meaning cannot be entertained, weighed and judged. On the other hand, if there is sometime such that the mentioned sentence expresses the CCE that Pooh is happy at that time, the sentence has non-relative truth conditions and the meaning it takes on (i.e. the CCE it expresses) can be weighed and judged. In either event, it seems, truth-relativity tracks an inability to be considered or judged.[14,15]

The moral appears to be that the context-independent meanings of indexical-containing sentences and matrices form a cognitive grouping that is entirely disjoint from the class occupied by CCEs. We entertain or consider CCEs, and (when they are not trivially true or false) we evaluate the reasons for and against endorsing them. We cannot bear the

same cognitive relations to matrices. Moreover, it appears that this is so because the truth-value of an indexical sentence meaning or a propositional matrix is always a relative matter. That is, it appears that truth-relativity prohibits aptness to be judged, and that 'CCE' is just another word for proposition. The *cognitive relativist* will have to claim that these appearances are misleading – that there is a special class of entities that can be considered, weighed and judged but which nevertheless possess matrix-like truth conditions.

4. FUTURE CONTINGENTS

I begin my case against cognitive relativism with a discussion of MacFarlane's (2003) treatment of future contingents. Consider a subject Jake who at some time t assertively utters, "There will be a sea battle tomorrow." And consider a subject Sally who the next day, at t + 1, as a sea battle rages on, says, "As it turns out, Jake said something true yesterday."[16] MacFarlane says that we have the intuition that what Jake says at t is neither true nor false, whereas what Sally says at t + 1 is true. To capture these intuitions MacFarlane proposes that the proposition Jake expresses when he says "There will be a sea battle tomorrow", at t is (at t) neither true nor false relative to Jake's t-bound point of assessment (JT), that this very proposition is (at t) true relative to the t + 1–bound point of assessment at which Sally says what she does (SBT1), and that it is (at t) false relative to the point of evaluation supplied by an alternative t + 1 in which there is no sea battle (NBT1). He goes on to give a semantics for future contingent sentences that delivers these results. Where 'π' is a schematic letter for sentences, 'm' is a variable that ranges over times, 'k' ranges over possible histories, and 'm/k' serves to pick out a moment/history pair in which the moment m *belongs to* the history k:

> π is true at a context of utterance u and context of assessment a if and only if π is true at every point on m/k such that (1) m = the moment of u, and (2) k passes though m and (if a > m) through the moment of a as well. (2003, p. 331)

When Jake says ''There will be a sea battle tomorrow,'' at t the sentence he uses is true at the then current context u* and the then current point of assessment a* only if 'There will be a sea battle tomorrow' is true at *every* moment/history pair for which the moment is t and the history passes through t. Let k* be a history that passes through t and NBT1. Since 'There will be a sea battle tomorrow' is false at t/k*, 'There will be a sea battle tomorrow' is not true when used by Jake at the time at which he uses it. What happens when we introduce propositions (qua things said in contexts) into the account? MacFarlane holds that at t Jake uses 'There will be a sea battle tomorrow' to express a proposition that is not true at his t-bound point of assessment.

The first point to be made here is that MacFarlane's account has *revolutionary* implications. If every contingent proposition about the future is semantically insured to be neither true nor false from the point of assessment provided by the time at which it is made, there is a straightforward sense in which we should stop believing these propositions. Jake should not believe that 'There will be a sea battle tomorrow,'' expresses something that is true when he utters it, and he should not believe the proposition it then expresses. That is, Jake's belief is not true relative to the time at which he expresses it, and he can recognize its lack of truth at the time simply by grasping the truth conditions possessed by the sentence he has uttered in the context in which he utters it. No matter which possible future is (or will be) actual, no matter how things turn out, Jake says something that is not true at the time he says it. He shouldn't believe what he says.

One might think this overstates things somewhat. The fact that what Jake says is neither true nor false relative to the time at which he utters, ''There will be a sea battle tomorrow,'' isn't *directly* built into the sentence's truth conditions. MacFarlane's semantics merely say that a future contingent proposition is true at the time at which it is expressed if and only if that proposition is true at every future point of assessment that can be ''accessed'' from the time of expression by a ''live'' historical path. So one can say that Jake's mistake in

believing that there will be a sea battle at t + 1 stems from his thinking that there are no viable paths for history to take that include both t and a sea-battle-less day after t.

But surely this *need not* be Jake's mistake. Jake can believe that there will be a sea battle at t + 1 while believing that it is objectively *possible* (if unlikely) that the battle will be averted. Suppose Jake believes that there are possible sea-battle-less ways the next day might turn out, but his knowledge of world affairs gives him great confidence that none of these ways will actually obtain. And suppose he believes, for this reason, that there will be a sea battle at t + 1. Then, on MacFarlane's account, Jake is simply confused. His beliefs cannot be true as assessed from the point in time at which he holds them. And Jake's beliefs don't just happen not to be true at that time; the fact that they are not then true is entailed by the truth conditions determined by the proposition he believes. So there is a sense in which Jake is unjustified in believing that there will be a sea battle at t + 1 so long as he believes peace is possible – holding the later belief fixed he should be able to discern that the former proposition is not true at the time he believes it from his grasp of its truth conditions. Similar reasoning applies to all of us who continue to believe future contingents with something less than full certainty. You should stop believing that you will wake up tomorrow and so should I.

5. THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF RELATIVISM WITH SEMANTIC KNOWLEDGE

In fact, this criticism understates the problem considerably. It isn't just that Jake should not believe what he has said. Rather, if he grasps the truth conditions of the sentence he is using, and he is even *minimally* rational, he *cannot* believe what he has said.

Let's use 'P' to denote the proposition Jake expresses when he assertively utters "There will be a sea battle tomorrow," at t. Suppose Jake accepts MacFarlane's account, and so concludes that P is neither true nor false at t, and that P is true at each

possible t + 1 future f if and only if there is a sea battle at that f. Clearly, if at t Jake believes that P is true relative to whichever t + 1 future is (or will be) actual, and neither true nor false relative to t, he cannot simply believe P. If he is not grossly irrational, Jake can only believe that P is true at the t + 1 future that will actually obtain. (And, of course, he can also believe the proposition that P is true at the t + 2 future that will be actualized, and the proposition that P is true at each of the possible t + *n* futures that will be actualized for all $n \geq 1$). But the proposition that P is true at the actual t + 1 future (or the possible t + 1 future that will be actualized) is not P itself. It is instead a distinct proposition P*, where P* is not relatively true, but true absolutely. In this way knowledge of a relativistic semantics destroys belief in the entities to which it is supposed to apply.

At one point MacFarlane considers whether Jake might intend to make a claim about what will happen in the *actual* future history. He rejects the idea as follows: "If 'the actual future history' means 'the future that includes this utterance' then it is an improper definite description. This is no such unique history" (2003, p. 323.). So it seems that MacFarlane thinks the relevant future cannot be picked out with language, that it cannot be thought about, and that it therefore cannot be the object of Jake's intention. If this is his view, MacFarlane will say that Jake cannot both stop believing P (the proposition that there will be a sea battle at t + 1) and come to believe P* (the proposition that the proposition that there will be a sea battle at t + 1 is (or will be) true at that future, whatever it is, that is (or turns out to be) actual). MacFarlane will deny the very existence of P* and say that Jake cannot grasp (and so cannot believe) such a proposition.

Two responses immediately come to mind. First, it seems that if Jake can grasp MacFarlane's semantics then Jake can indeed pick out and think about the actual future. MacFarlane says that when it is uttered at t 'There will be a sea battle tomorrow' expresses a proposition that is true as assessed at each of the possible ways for t + 1 to be in which there is a sea battle. On the standard way of generating these "ways t + 1 might be" each such possibility is incompatible with all

the rest. So Jake can easily reason that at most one of these possible futures will actually obtain. Perhaps Jake cannot form a *de re* thought about the one possible future that is (or will be) actual, but in so far as MacFarlane's semantics enable MacFarlane to talk about the possible t + 1 futures and assure us that at most one of them will be actualized, Jake can believe that there will be a sea battle at that one future (whatever it is or turns out to be).

Second, suppose that (despite this argument) we conclude that even after he has accepted MacFarlane's semantics Jake can't believe that the proposition that there will be a sea battle at t + 1 is (or will be) true as assessed from the actual future. Jake still won't simply believe that the proposition that there will be a sea battle at t + 1 is true as assessed at t. So the negative point remains untouched. Accepting MacFarlane's semantic would still strip Jake of all his beliefs in contingent propositions about the future. If we all accepted the relativist's semantics, its relativistic truth-conditions would not be the truth-conditions of any believed proposition.[17]

On MacFarlane's view, our situation with regard to 'The Earth will exist tomorrow' looks to be exactly like our situation with regard to 'I am happy' considered without a particular speaker in mind and 'Pooh is happy' considered without a particular time in mind. If we suppose that the 'The Earth will exist tomorrow' when uttered in a particular context has different truth-values for different points of assessment, we cannot just believe that the sentence as uttered is true. And if we cannot believe that the sentence as uttered is true, we cannot believe what it is then and there used to assert.

6. GRADABLE ADJECTIVES

Sentences containing gradable adjectives such as 'tall' and 'rich' are commonly thought to express different propositions in different contexts of use. Suppose Mary is a resident of both the wealthy United States and impoverished Haiti, and that her net worth is average for the U.S. but extraordinarily high for Haiti. There's a common intuition that a Haitian

among Haitians can truly say, ''Mary is rich,'' at the same time that an American among Americans truly says, ''Mary is not rich.'' What the Haitian says is true if and only if Mary is rich for a Haitian. What the American says is true if and only if Mary is rich for an American. So what the Haitian says does not contradict what the American says.[18] The two speakers use the same sentence to express two different propositions. They're able to do this, it is claimed, because 'rich' is associated with different *comparison classes* in different contexts.

So far, so good: we have contextual variation without substantive relativism. But seizing upon suggestions made by Lewis (1979b), Richard (2004) has recently argued that gradable adjectives display an additional dimension of contextual variation. According to Richard, even if two speakers (and their respective audiences) associate the same contrast class with a gradable adjective, they may nevertheless use it to express different propositions if they have different ideas about the (perhaps vaguely specified) *cut-off point* above which something does, and below which it does not, satisfy the term. In such a case, two speakers can make what Richard calls a single ''r-claim,'' where this claim can be true for the one speaker (and audience) and false for the other.

Suppose, for instance, that Bill is a rich American speaking among rich Americans, and Jill is a poor American among poor Americans. Bill will only apply 'rich' to people he believes have a net worth above (around) two million dollars, whereas Jill will apply 'rich' to anyone worth at least $250,000 (or so). Now Jill says in her crowd, ''Mary is rich,'' whereas Bill says, ''Mary is not rich,'' in his. Both Bill and Jill intend to state something about Mary's wealth in comparison to all other Americans and are taken by their respective audiences to be advancing claims of this sort. (So there is no variation with respect to contrast class in this case.) Nevertheless, Richard insists, there is some difference in what 'Mary is rich' *says* in the two contexts. To capture the sense in which these two speakers disagree, Richard says that Jill makes an r-claim that Bill denies. To capture the sense in which their disagreement is not

substantive, Richard says that this r-claim determines different propositions in the two different contexts, and that 'rich' in their respective mouths expresses two different properties. Suppose Mary is actually worth $500,000. Then the r-claim that Jill makes is, in Richard's view, *true for Jill* (and her audience) and *false for Bill* (and his).

There are two theses being advanced here. The first is that there is an additional parameter associated with gradable adjectives beyond the one that determines different comparison classes in different contexts of use. If one denies this, one will say that Jill affirms whereas Bill denies a single proposition: the proposition that Mary is rich. Against this naïve view, Richard cites the fact that, ''we naturally use the terms 'correct' and 'true' in assessing applications of the term which accord with the speaker's settled dispositions for using the term and which don't rely on factual mistakes'' (2004, p. 225). Of course, one might dispute the somewhat narrow idea of what constitutes a factual mistake that leads Richard to reject the naïve view. Surely it could be a factual mistake to think that a person must be worth two million dollars to be rich for an American. For instance, Bill might be genuinely ignorant of the fact that only one of every ten American households makes more than $90,000 a year, and it might be that were he to learn this fact, he would agree that Mary is rich for an American, and that he previously said something false when he uttered, ''Mary is not rich,'' among his wealthy friends.

But suppose, as Richard seems to assume, that some fully rational, fully informed, fully competent speakers of English can set (around) two million dollars as the bar for satisfying 'rich' and that others can be satisfied with (around) $250,000. If we make this supposition, can we then say that Bill applies 'not rich' and Jill applies 'rich' to Mary though Bill and Jill agree on ''all the facts''? Even now the answer is not obvious: If Bill and Jill agree on *all* the facts, then they can't disagree about the fact – if it is one – that Mary is rich. That is, we are here imagining that Bill and Jill both know the extent of Mary's wealth, that they know all the general facts about the finances of Americans, but yet one still says ''Mary is rich,''

and the other "Mary is not rich"; when we go on to assume that the facts on which they agree are all the facts (or all the facts that are relevant) we assume that there cannot be *brute* disagreement between Jill and Bill over whether Mary is rich. We assume that if there is a fact that someone worth $500,000 is rich for an American, this fact must be grounded in some set of distinct facts, where all rational fully competent speakers of the language in question will endorse this distinct set of facts when presented with them. This broadly Kantian assumption requires argumentative support, but we should grant it here for the sake of argument.

Now Richard says that even when we assume that Bill and Jill use 'rich' in two different ways, and that neither one of these ways is the *correct* way to apply the term to people in a given contrast class, we will still want to capture a sense in which they *disagree* with one another. R-claims are brought into the picture for precisely this reason. And this brings us to our question: does admitting r-claims commit us to *substantive* relativism? Can we say that Jill both asserts and believes an r-claim that Bill both denies and disbelieves where this r-claim is true for her and false for Bill?

Suppose, with Richard, that what Jill says when she utters 'Mary is rich' is the r-claim that Mary is rich for an American, and that this r-claim is true relative to her context cj iff Mary has more than (around) $250,000. And suppose that what Bill says when he utters 'Mary is rich' is the very same r-claim that Mary is rich for an American, and that this r-claim is true relative to his context cb iff Mary has more than (around) two million dollars. Do Jill and Bill believe what they say?

Our arguments against MacFarlane's relativistic treatment of future contingents apply here as well. It seems that if Bill and Jill can believe what they say, this ability hangs upon substantive semantic ignorance. If Jill knows that what she says in cj is true relative to cj if and only if Mary has (around) $250,000 or more, and false relative to contexts like cb if and only if Mary has less that (around) two million, and she knows that Mary has $500,000, she won't believe the r-claim that Mary is rich. She won't hold a belief that (she

knows) is true relative to some contexts and false relative to others. Rather she'll believe the *proposition* that Mary is rich for an American when you're counting (something around) net worth ≥$500,000 as rich for an American, and she'll believe the proposition that Mary is not rich when you're counting something around two million dollars as the cut-off point. The same goes for Bill. Neither will be able to simply endorse an item that is true relative to one context and false relative to another.

Perhaps the relativist won't balk at saying that those of us who continue to assert and believe future contingent propositions are simply confused. But how plausible is it to suppose that when we use gradable adjectives to say what we believe, we are grossly ignorant of what it would take for what we have said to be true?

Suppose that Jill doesn't realize that there are people out there who only apply 'rich' to the wealthiest 1% of a given population. It seems that there are two possible reactions she might have to discovering this alternative way of "setting the bar." First, she might reevaluate her own standard in light of this discovery and what she knows about wealth. Her subsequent uses of 'rich' will then reflect the outcome of her reevaluation. Of course, Jill won't now say, "Adam is rich according to criterion X". Insofar as she is now convinced that X is the right criterion, she will simply say, "Adam is rich", while assuming that Adam's meeting X makes it *true simpliciter* that Adam is rich (for a given population). But there is a second possible response: Jill might decide that there are several equally good, non-equivalent ways of setting the bar for richness. She will then, in Lewis' (1979b) words, *accommodate* herself to the standards that are in play in each conversational setting that she encounters. Among Bill and his friends, she will say "Mary is not rich", and among her own crowd she will say, "Mary is rich". But, of course, this variability won't indicate any change in Jill's beliefs. No matter what the setting, Jill still believes that Mary is not rich for an American according to Bill's standards, and that Mary is rich for an American according to the standards that used to be her own. She now has no beliefs about

richness simpliciter. She no more believes that Mary is rich for an American simpliciter than that Mary is rich for an F simpliciter (where 'F' if free) or that x is rich for an American simpliciter (where 'x' is free).

Is this a problem for Richard's view? Well, Richard explicitly says that a change in one's standards does not bring about a change in one's overall system of beliefs (2004, p. 240), and he quite clearly distinguishes his relatively true r-claims from absolutely true propositions. Nevertheless, insofar as Richard is trying to account for the intuition that Bill and Jill disagree, I think he must say that one believes something that the other denies. This is surely how a third party would describe the case. Overhearing both Jill's and Bill's conversations we'll say that Jill believes that Mary is rich while Bill believes that Mary is not rich, and we'll say that Bill denies the very thing that Mary believes. Richard seems to want to take these third party reactions at face value without embracing the naïve view that a single proposition is believed by Jill and disbelieved by Bill. But if we say that the bone of contention is not a proposition but an r-claim, we must say that Bill's and Jill's beliefs, and the disagreement that they generate, remain in place by the grace of semantic ignorance alone.

7. DE SE BELIEF AND KNOWLEDGE

David Lewis (1979a) claims that all belief is self-ascription, and that the things we self-ascribe – and thus the objects of our beliefs – are properties. Some of the properties we self-ascribe correspond to propositions. To believe that all Fs are Gs is (on an intermediate stage of Lewis' view) to believe that one occupies a possible world in which all Fs are Gs. But having this belief really amounts to self-ascribing the property *inhabiting a world in which all Fs are Gs*. Here the proposition that one inhabits a world in which all Fs are Gs is said to correspond to the property in question, though it is the property, not the proposition, that one really believes.[19]

Why should we endorse this bizarre sounding view? Because we want a unitary account of the objects of belief, and, Lewis claims, *first-person* beliefs can only be correctly described as attitudes towards properties. Consider Heimson, a deranged lunatic who sincerely says, "I am Hume". According to Lewis, when Heimson sincerely says 'I am Hume," and Hume sincerely says, "I am Hume," they give voice to the same belief. But because Hume's belief is true and Heimson's belief is false, they cannot believe the same proposition. Thus, they must believe (i.e. self-ascribe) the same property: *being Hume*. So we here have a single object of belief that possesses merely relative truth. The property *being Hume* is true for Hume and false for Heimson.[20]

Now I think we should question whether Lewis ever really had the "intuition" that Hume and Heimson believe the same thing. When Heimson considers whether he (Heimson) is Hume and Hume considers whether he (Hume) is Hume is there really any sense in which they are considering the same entity? Perhaps the same sentence ('I am Hume') runs through their heads. But the two men are not considering sentences, they're considering themselves, and the selves they're considering are both introspectively and actually different: the one belongs to a great philosopher and the other to a deranged lunatic. In fact, to make the disparity more obvious we can imagine that Heimson speaks German and that 'Hume' is the only English word he understands. If we are not skeptics about the ability of translation to preserve synonymy we can nevertheless say that Heimson believes that he is Hume, and he believes the proposition that he would express were he to understand and sincerely assertively utter, "I am Hume." But though Heimson has this belief there doesn't seem to be any sense in which Heimson (so described) has considered and endorsed the very thing belief in which leads Hume to say, "I am Hume".

Truth be told, though Lewis initially presents his view as pre-theoretic intuition, it soon becomes clear that he is motivated by a desire to have belief content come out *narrow* so that molecule-for-molecule duplicates come out believing

exactly the same things. And he is equally explicit in arguing that beliefs (or credences) must have narrow contents, because only then can they combine with desires (or preferences) to cause actions. That is, Lewis appeals to relativism to save a causal view of folk psychological explanation and a narrow view of causation *from* the data that emerge when we examine our use of first-person pronouns. Of course it would be unfair not to acknowledge that Lewis' motivations (theoretical though they may be) are shared by other philosophers; but then we must also admit that many theorists have rejected these intuitions whole cloth. The twenty-five years since the publication of "Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*", have failed to produce a widely accepted argument for the conclusion that beliefs with wide contents cannot play a role in causing our actions.

Nevertheless, my aim here is not to argue that we can do without narrow content. I want to ask, instead, whether a solution to worries over wide content is worth the cost of relativism; and I want to suggest that the arguments against relativism we have already canvassed provide a negative answer.

Suppose that Hume has foreknowledge of his philosophical heir and that he comes to accept what Lewis says about the conditions under which what he (Hume) believes is true. Hume then knows that when he says, "I am Hume" he expresses a belief in something (i.e. a property: *being David Hume*) that is true for one person and false for everyone else (at the actual world). Won't Hume then stop simply believing this thing? Won't he then believe that the thing in question is true for him (Hume) and false for everyone else? As a rational man Hume cannot accept that the thing he believes is true for x and false for y and still go on believing that very thing. The fact that the item in question is said to be a property and not a proposition makes no discernable difference to this requirement.[21]

Extending this critique to relativist accounts of knowledge is trivial. John's mother asks if he knows where her car is. "Sure", he says "I just took it to the repair shop". Tony the skeptic is listening from the living room and says to his

assembled minions, "What John said is false. John doesn't know where his mother's car is located. For all he knows the repair shop has been emptied by thieves. (Indeed, for all anyone knows, we could all be brains in vats, so no one even knows that cars exist!)" The relativist tells us that John affirms and Tony denies the very same proposition but that they are both (relatively) right: what John asserts and believes is true for him (and his mother) and false for Tony (and his wide-eyed converts). Why? Because, according to the relativist, the semantic facts are something like this:

> The proposition that S knows P is true from a point of evaluation e if and only if P is true and S's evidence (or his experience or the sum of his reasons for believing P) "rules out" (or is incompatible with) those alternatives to P's truth that are salient in e.

From John and his mother's shared point of evaluation the possibility that the repair shop has been robbed of all its cars is not salient; among the skeptics this possibility is salient. John's evidence (or his experience or the sum of his reasons for believing) that his mother's car is at the shop does not rule out this skeptical scenario. So the proposition that John knows that his mother's car is at the shop is true for the ordinary folk and not true for the skeptics.

Of course John needn't be naïve. We can suppose that he knows that a repair shop robbery is physically *possible*, and he knows that he isn't in a position to (deductively) *prove* that one hasn't occurred. So if John is rational, and still maintains that he knows where his mother's car is located, and if he really believes what he has asserted, we must accuse him of semantic ignorance. He must not realize that what he has asserted can only be true relative to his loose epistemic standards and must be false relative to a skeptic's. If John grasped the truth conditions of what he has asserted, he would alter his beliefs to fit. He'd believe that he knows where his mother's car is located relative to points of evaluation that don't "count" unlikely possibilities like evil geniuses, tornadoes and high-stakes larceny, and that he doesn't know where his mother's car is at points of evaluation that

do count such things. Unless his mind is blunted by semantic ignorance, he won't believe a proposition that is both relatively true and relatively false.

8. SEMANTIC IGNORANCE

At this point one may be asking why we shouldn't just go ahead and posit widespread semantic ignorance. Suppose one shares MacFarlane's intuition that contingent claims about the future are neither true nor false from a present perspective but that the same propositions have determinate truth values when they're evaluated "as past," that one goes along with Richard in thinking that debates over who is rich often contain both an element of genuine disagreement and a significant semantic mismatch, that one buys Lewis' claim that Hume and Heimson believe the same thing even though Hume's belief is true and Heimson's belief is false, and that one agrees with MacFarlane and Richard that John and Tony disagree about John's frame of mind even though they each believe something that is true in their respective circumstances. If one has all of these inclinations, one might conclude that relativism is worth the price of ignorance. Perhaps we don't know what we're saying, or though we do in some attenuated sense grasp the meaning that accrues to the sentences we're using when we're using them, we don't grasp the conditions under which these sentences when so used would be true. We must ask, then, whether the philosophical intuitions that motivate relativism in all of its incarnations are less rational to abandon that the intuition that we know what we assert and believe.

It is hard to see how they could be. The relativist has been forced into the claim that we are necessarily ignorant of the truth conditions of a certain class of propositions that we nevertheless believe. The relativist must therefore advance his semantics in the same spirit that the eliminativist advances her extraordinary claim about beliefs. The view is supposed to be true even though it cannot be believed. Clearly, this is not an ideal rhetorical situation for the relativist to find

herself occupying. I am at least minimally rational and I understand the relativistic truth conditions described above, but I am not the least bit motivated to abandon my belief that I will wake up tomorrow or my belief that I know where my car is located. How can the relativist explain this reaction?

And it is not just that cognitive relativism can only exist behind the shadows on the cave's wall: the position to which the relativist is forced grates against the only existing understanding of what natural language semantics is supposed to be. The data for semantic theories are provided by our intuitions about the conditions under which what a sentence says in a particular context would be true (along with syntactic constraints imposed by compositionality and simplicity assumptions). Insofar as our intuitions are to be trusted as an accurate guide to the truth conditions a sentence has in a context, we must have some grasp, however tacit, of these conditions. Substantive cognitive relativism simply cannot be reconciled with this view. The relativist therefore owes us a viable alternative conception of semantic knowledge and an alternative source of data for the evaluation of competing semantic theories.

9. SEPARATING LANGUAGE FROM MIND

So far I have been content to argue that a proposition could not play its classical cognitive role if its truth were relative. The arguments I have advanced therefore do not directly confront a weakened relativist view that simply rejects the classic view of propositions. On the weakened view I have in mind, what one asserts when one uses a sentence in a context is often both true relative to one parameter and false relative to another (at a single possible world) – and, moreover, one tacitly knows and can come to explicitly accept that this is so without being forced into silence. Nevertheless, the weakened view claims, when one sincerely asserts something and so intends to express what one believes about some topic, the thing that one believes differs in truth conditions from the

thing that one asserts. What one believes in such a case is true or false absolutely, whereas what one asserts, if it is true, is only relatively so.

There is an obvious technical cost to this maneuver: it means significantly complicating a class of seemingly direct inferences. I seem to directly infer that John believes what Jill has asserted from the fact that John believes that Mary is rich and Jill has asserted that Mary is rich. And it seems that my grasp of the identity relation provides all the warrant I need to justly make this transition. If what Jill asserts is not strictly speaking what John believes, this almost irresistible description of the inference must be resisted. Thus, if the bifurcationist is proposing a relativistic semantics for the English expression 'asserts that', the cards are stacked against her from the start.

But suppose the bifurcationist relativist accepts this technical challenge undaunted. How might she try to motivate her non-standard account? Let's concentrate on 'rich'. Suppose that we've agreed with Richard that gradable adjectives are doubly context-sensitive and we're now trying to evaluate the claim that what Jill uses 'Mary is rich' to assert in a particular context has relativistic truth-conditions. Recall that the relativist has been forced to admit: (1) that the belief to which Jill gives voice when she utters, ''Mary is rich'', has absolute truth conditions, (2) that the beliefs Jill's audience would acquire were they to believe what Jill has asserted will also have non-relative truth conditions, and (3) that the holding of the conflicting cognitive attitudes of *belief* and *disbelief* towards a single relatively true and relatively false item cannot account for our intuitions of inter-context disagreement like the one that seems to hold between Bill and Jill. What role is then left for this relatively true and relatively false thing that Jill is supposed to have asserted?

Of course, we must admit that Jill's words (in and of themselves) don't fully capture her beliefs. That is, we have assumed that Jill really believes that Mary is rich for an American when you're counting a net worth of something around $250,000 as sufficient for being rich. But we're also

assuming that she limits her attempt to express this belief to a terse utterance of 'Mary is rich'. Now if we make these assumptions I can see no reason not to allow that when Jill says, "Mary is rich," she launches its character-like (relatively-true and relatively-false) context-independent meaning into the conversational atmosphere. But the mere fact that this character-like entity has been (in some sense) *expressed* doesn't provide us with a reason to identify it with the thing that Jill has *asserted*. Insofar as Jill is really trying to assert the thing that she believes – insofar as she is trying to say what she thinks – she expresses the character-like meaning of 'Mary is rich' with a robust (if tacit) set of expectations. Jill expects that her audience will grasp the non-propositional entity that her words express on their own. But she also assumes that they will pair this meaning with a particular comparison class (Americans) and a rough cut-off point ($250,000) that they at least provisionally accept. And Jill expects that if her audience trusts her, they will endorse the "completed" entity that emerges from this pairing. Jill expects that if her audience finds what she has asserted convincing they will believe it and therein come to share the view that led her to open her mouth in the first place. What Jill succeeds in asserting in such a circumstance is not the relative-truth-valued context-independent meaning of 'Mary is rich', but the absolute-truth-valued semantic value it acquires in the context described. Jill no more asserts something that is true for her and false for Bill than Hume says something that is true for him and false for Heimson.

What happens if Jill's expectations are not met? What happens if she misjudges the standards of wealth her audience brings to the conversation? Jill will then think that she has asserted that Mary is rich when you are allowing wealth of roughly such and such an extent as sufficient, whereas Jill's audience will think that Jill has said that Mary is rich for an American when you're insisting on substantially more wealth than that. Which one of them is right? Because we have moved away from successful communication to consider a degenerate case, I am sympathetic to the view that no clear

answer can be given to questions about what Jill has *really* asserted in such a case. I think we must instead satisfy ourselves with specifying what Jill intended to assert and what he audience took her to assert without "choosing sides." But even if the semanticist does privilege the audience's or the speaker's perspective, she cannot privilege both at once, and this is what the relativist insists that she do. The semanticist cannot say, "Jill asserted that Φ," and expect to have therein specified the relative-truth-valued semantic entity that Jill and her audience construed in different ways. If the semanticist *successfully* specifies what Jill asserted when she says that Jill asserted that Φ, the clause of the form 'that Φ' that she uses for this purpose must denote an absolute-truth-valued proposition. And while it is perhaps appropriate to theorize about miscommunication, it is altogether monstrous to intentionally miscommunicate when theorizing.[22]

Let us suppose, then, that Richard is right in claiming that 'knows' is like 'rich'. Then the belief that leads John to say, "I know that my mother's car is at the shop," is really the belief that he knows that the car is at the shop when you're not being a "hard grader" and so not counting the compatibility of his evidence with far-flung possibilities in which the proposition he believes is false. John simply utters, "I know that my mother's car is at the shop", because he expects that context will guide his listeners from the incomplete meaning his words have in isolation to the proposition that he both asserts and believes in the context in question. If his expectations are met, he will successfully communicate his thoughts, and there will be no doubt that he has said what he believes. If his expectations are not met, there may be some doubt as to whether he has asserted the thing he actually believes or instead asserted what his audience came to believe as a result of listening to him speak. Nevertheless, we cannot use indirect quotation to say that John has asserted what the relativist claims John has asserted.

Now I'm pretty sure that this is not the way 'knows' works. When John says 'I know that the car is at the shop," he gives voice to his belief that he knows that his mother's

car is at the shop, not his belief that he knows this proposition so long as we're assuming a fairly weak epistemic standard. Even after we have agreed on all the facts about who has what evidence and what relations hold between their evidence and the true propositions they believe, we can still hold a substantive debate over whether or not they *know* that which they claim to know. The extension of the single relation expressed by 'knows' in all contexts in which it is used is the true point of controversy between the skeptic and the dogmatist. But then my gripe here is with the contextualist, not the relativist. Relativism isn't even really a live option.

10. CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to show that a given relativistic semantics cannot be true of a range of propositions that we believe if we believe that this particular relativistic semantics is correct. I think this is reason enough for us to limit ourselves to the pursuit of non-relativistic accounts of knowledge, first-person belief, and future contingents. But I remain convinced that there exist even stronger arguments against cognitive relativism than the ones I have formulated. That is, it isn't just that we cannot believe a relativistic semantics and rationally believe the items that (it says) are only relatively true. Rather, entities that are only relatively true are like rocks and chairs and bottles of beer – they are not the kinds of things that *can* be judged.

Admittedly, there are relative-truth-valued semantic values that we in some sense *express*, but then conceding this is not likely to be of much philosophical importance. A lazy person needn't use words that "in and of themselves" say exactly what she believes; she can let her words express something else and rely on context to finish the job. And it may be that shared context is sometimes even necessary for the communication of particular thoughts. But debates over what people believe and know, what the future will hold, and what we should and shouldn't do, are all serious business. If we want to say what we believe about these matters – if we want to

assert something that would be true in exactly those circumstances in which what we believe would be true – we surely *can* do this. Language is a flexible and powerful tool. If context comes up short we can always fill the gaps ourselves.[23]

NOTES

[1] David Chalmers (2004) claims that beliefs have a kind of content – which he calls a "primary intension" – that, like the objects of Lewis' de se beliefs – can be both true at a possible world w with one person conceived of as its center, and false at w with another person conceived of as its center. I won't directly critique Chalmers' account here, but those who know it should be able to see how my criticisms of Lewis might be extended to it.

[2] An equivalent point can be made if sentences are individuated with their meanings. In that case, the non-sentential entities that sentences disambiguate will often be uncontroversially true relative to one disambiguation and false relative to another.

[3] MacFarlane makes this suggestion (2003), as do Egan et al. (forthcoming); cf. Richard (1981) where it is said to be a commitment of a classical view of propositions that a sentence token, token utterance, or sentence in a context, "expresses at most one proposition at a time" (p. 2).

[4] Mightn't one argue that Max has produced two token utterances? Doing so amounts to simply refusing to draw a line between utterances, sentences and propositions and willfully closing one's eyes to real distinctions that are there to be made. (I am, however, leaving it open whether Max produces a single utterance of two different sentences.)

[5] Actually, I think in ordinary life, when we use 'true' outside of the scope of a modal expression, we use 'true' to mean what the possible worlds semanticist means by 'actually true'. If this is right, most ordinary truth-ascriptions won't even be modally relative. The point remains: if one uses 'true' as a possible worlds semanticist does (so that it does not mean *actually true*) then one should interpret what follows as arguing that the truth of a proposition is relative to a possible world and nothing else.

[6] See Church (1957) for an instructive history of 'proposition' and its Greek roots.

[7] In debates about translation and analyticity, a proposition is often identified as the meaning of each sentence in a set of synonymous sentences. This is wrong. When synonymous sentences involve context-sensitive expressions the meaning they have in common is a character-like entity. For example, 'I am bonkers' and 'I am crazy' are synonymous because they express the same proposition in any given context – the synonymy of the pair consists in their expressing something that determines

the same function from contexts to propositions. One might identify a proposition with the meaning of each member of a set of synonymous wholly context-insensitive sentences, but this identification is parasitic on the one given in the text. Cf. W.V.O. Quine (1960, p. 201).

[8] Quine (1960, chapter 6) is perhaps the best attempt to explicate and defend propositional nihilism.

[9] But, again, this prima facie case does not represent my final word on the matter. After the ground has been softened here I will go on in subsequent sections to mount a distinct argument against the particular versions of relativism described in this paper's introduction.

[10] Of course, Ms. S has used the "quote name" of 'I am happy' (i.e. the name I just used), and she has uttered 'I am happy' insofar as she has uttered a name of which this sentence is a part.

[11] Might the merely mentioned sentence express a more general proposition, such as the proposition that the speaker of 'I am happy' in this context (whoever she is) is happy? We can leave open whether S *could* use 'I am happy' to express this proposition. To adapt an example of John Perry's (1997), we can imagine a case in which S sends a postcard with 'I am happy' written on it, but with no signature and no return address. Perhaps in this Perry-inspired scenario S uses 'I am happy' to say that whoever wrote this postcard is happy, and a competent speaker who reads such a postcard, and understands the sentence written on it, would conclude that the sentence (in this setting) says that whoever wrote it is happy. But, again, if 'I am happy' does express this (non-singular) proposition here, its ability to do so is contingent on at least one of the two features we have identified: The sentence must be written with the right communicative intent or be such as to provoke the natural assumption that it was so written. Ms. S writes 'I am happy' without intending to communicate anything about anyone's happiness. And when she explicitly disavows any such intention, she therein insures that competent listeners will not assume that she has used the sentence to say something of this sort. She insures that the sentence won't express any of the propositions it could express were it used rather than merely mentioned

[12] Cf. David Braun (1996). 'Context' has both natural and technical uses. On David Kaplan's (1989) technical use a context must be *proper* – it must supply a speaker, time, location and world. So if we want to preserve Kaplan's usage we should say that 'I am happy' as presented to you in the *scenario* described in the text is presented *out of context*. Alternatively, if we understand 'context' in a non-technical way (or in a different technical way) we can say that when 'I am happy' is merely mentioned, it is uttered in an incomplete or *partial context*. The difference here is entirely terminological.

[13] We can uncontroversially stipulate that S presents 'Pooh is happy' without intending to express the proposition that Pooh is happy at the

time of her utterance (or the proposition that Pooh is happy at the time of the sentence's being read) or anything with these non-relative truth-conditions. So if speaker's intentions are *decisive*, there is no time t such that 'Pooh is happy' (when presented in the specified context) says that Pooh is happy at t. I say that there is some question whether 'Pooh is happy' expresses a proposition in our example, because I want to remain neutral on the relative importance of "internal" and "external" features of context.

[14] Following Richard (1981, 1982), Salmon (1986, pp. 37–40) argues that to give an accurate semantics for sentences involving *temporal operators* propositional matrices must be countenanced as a sentential semantic value distinct from his programs and propositions. Even though the Governor of California is now a Republican, we can currently use 'Sometimes the Governor of California is a Democrat' to say something that is true. We couldn't get truth conditions that deliver this result if 'sometimes' operated on the proposition now expressed by 'The Governor of California is a Democrat'. Of course, this argument that 'sometimes' operates on matrices assumes that a single proposition cannot have different truth-values at different times, which is one of the things I'm trying to establish with this essay. Jeffrey King (forthcoming) argues that 'sometimes' is not an operator and that there are no reasons to countenance matrices as semantic values. The arguments in the text show that even if King is right about the syntax – and there are no natural language expressions that operate on matrices – the existence of matrices (or something like them) must be acknowledged. To argue otherwise is to deny that we grasp the meanings sentences have when they are merely mentioned.

[15] Suppose you're in the classroom again and Ms. S coins the term 'T' as a name for the then current time. She then asks you to consider the sentence 'Pooh is happy at T'. Now you can easily consider what it would take for this sentence to be true – and therein entertain the CCE it expresses – and then invest some more of less determinate level of confidence in its truth (depending, of course, on what you believe about the bear's current mood). The context-independent meaning of this unambiguous, indexical-free, "eternal" sentence is simply true or simply false, and its meaning is therefore fit for consideration and judgment. Admittedly, there is some temptation to suppose that 'Pooh is happy at T' does not have entirely non-relative truth conditions when it is considered in isolation, because it expresses different CCEs when it is used at different possible worlds. This depends on whether an actual sentence could have a meaning other than the one it actually has. That is, if sentences don't have their meanings essentially then 'Pooh is happy at T' does not express a CCE independently of context; indeed nothing does. We should then understand the *maximally* context-independent meaning of an unambiguous sentence s in a language L as it is spoken at a time t in a world w to

be the meaning that s has independently of all contextual facts except the fact that s is a sentence of L as spoken in w at t.

[16] MacFarlane puts things in terms of *assertions* being true, rather than in terms of the truth of *what is asserted*. However, two facts warrant our restatement of the case: (1) MacFarlane claims that he is advancing a novel and controversial from of relativism and our discussion of double entendre already shows that (without augmentation) relativism about the truth of token utterances isn't substantive. (2) In more recent work MacFarlane explicitly advocates relativism about the truth of future contingent propositions. (I also make some further, albeit minor, changes to MacFarlane's discussion. For example, MacFarlane has Sally say to Jake at t + 1, "Your assertion yesterday turned out to be true." The sentence I have presented in the text is more natural, and it better describes the deterministic intuitions MacFarlane says he's trying to capture. If our past-directed judgments reflect determinism, Sally shouldn't think the proposition in question was neither true nor false and has now "turned" true; she should think it was true all along despite her ignorance of its truth.)

[17] There is also a third response. MacFarlane's relativism is not limited to future contingents; he also advocates relativistic views of epistemic and evaluative propositions (2003, p. 336). In the epistemic and evaluative cases it is obvious that we can denote and think about the parameter values to which the truth of a given proposition is relativized. Thus, even if it is true, the claim that we cannot think about the actual future does not constitute an adequately general response to these arguments against relativism.

[18] A fully adequate specification of the propositions expressed by 'Mary is rich' and the truth-conditions these propositions determine would include a specification of the time at which Mary is said to be rich. For ease of exposition, I will leave the temporal parameter introduced when we considered 'Pooh is happy' implicit throughout my discussion of gradable adjectives, first-person belief, and knowledge.

[19] Well, one might ask, what happened to the original proposition: i.e. the proposition that all Fs are Gs? Surely this is not the (singular) proposition that I occupy a world in which all Fs are Gs. It isn't even the (existential) proposition that someone occupies a world in which all Fs are Gs. Can't we consider and believe a truly general proposition about (and only about) the relation between Fs and Gs? On Lewis' egocentric view we cannot: a subject's thoughts are all self-ascriptive. But having said this, we must also point out that Lewis' account of self-ascriptive belief is radically *non*-egocentric. S's having the belief that she expresses by saying, "I occupy a world in which all Fs are Gs," consists in her being related by *belief* to the property *occupying a world in which all Fs are Gs*, and because *occupying a world in which all Fs are Gs* is also the object of the beliefs of

every other subject who sincerely says, "I occupy a world in which all Fs are Gs," at the time in question, the thing that S believes when she believes that all Fs are Gs (viz. that she occupies a world in which all Fs are Gs, viz. occupying a world in which all Fs are Gs) is as much about these other subjects as it is about herself. In Lewis' estimation the objects of general beliefs correspond to first-person propositions, but first-person propositions correspond to general properties.

[20] I propose to simply ignore the cringes that bring our shoulders to our ears when we hear Lewis say that certain properties are true and others are false. We should interpret Lewis as using 'property' in a technical way according to which properties can have truth-values. (He should have used 'shmahperty'.)

[21] Note that Lewis repeatedly declares his allegiance to a relational account of belief, so he should not be seen as rejecting the existence of things that play the cognitive role classically assigned to propositions. Moreover, so long as one holds that beliefs have truth conditions, a retreat to a non-relational view would not help. We can still show that a minimally rational person who knew that his belief had relativistic truth conditions could no longer hold that belief.

[22] Some theorists have argued that sentences can be "assertively uttered" but that what is asserted is always a proposition. I want to remain neutral on this matter. If we can assert sentences then there is something Jill has asserted that has merely relativistic truth conditions: the sentence 'Mary is rich'. But since relativism about sentences isn't substantive relativism (since it follows from the mere existence of ambiguity and indexicality) acknowledging this does not commit us to a substantial linguistic relativism. At issue is the concept expressed by 'asserts' when it attaches to a that-clause. Similarly, 'says' attaches to sentences in direct quotation and that-clauses in indirect quotation. At issue is the concept expressed by 'says' when it is used in that later way, not the former.

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