

Review of *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*, John MacFarlane, Oxford University Press, 2014

Dilip Ninan\*  
Tufts University  
[dilip.ninan@tufts.edu](mailto:dilip.ninan@tufts.edu)

This is an impressive book. It presents a bold and original theory with clarity and precision, and applies that theory to a number of topics of philosophical interest. The level of discussion is consistently high.

The book defends a version of relativism about truth. Although relativism has had a long history in philosophy, it has not – at least not until recently – received sustained attention from analytic philosophers. But in the last decade or so, philosophers and linguists have been debating the merits of a new brand of relativism, one couched in formalisms familiar from formal semantics. John MacFarlane has been one of the most prominent and able defenders of this approach, and *Assessment Sensitivity* represents the most recent and most comprehensive presentation of his distinctive brand of relativism.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of *Assessment Sensitivity* (“Foundations”) is largely devoted to explaining what relativism is, and to setting out what sort of evidence is needed in order to establish relativism for a given area of discourse. The second part of the book (“Applications”) then argues in detail for a relativist treatment of a number of philosophically interesting expressions: taste predicates, knowledge ascriptions, future contingents, and epistemic and deontic modals.

Although many of these ideas have appeared previously in MacFarlane’s widely-read articles, this book nevertheless constitutes a significant contribution to the literature. The explication and defense of the foundations of relativism is clearer and more detailed than what can be found in the earlier papers. The discussion of particular expressions has been refined and contains responses to significant objections. A final chapter addresses an important challenge that MacFarlane had not previously discussed in detail: whether it can be rational for an agent to speak an assessment sensitive language.

While the book focusses on the debate between relativism and its rivals, much can also be learned from what MacFarlane has to say along the way about a number of other topics, including the nature of context sensitivity, the relationship between formal semantic theories and actual language use, and

---

\*For comments and discussion, thanks to Torfinn Huvenes, Max Kölbel, and Sarah Moss.

<sup>1</sup>Other exponents of the ‘new relativism’ include Kölbel (2002, 2004), Richard (2004), Egan et al. (2005), Lasersohn (2005), and Stephenson (2007).

the relationship between semantics and metaphysics. And often at the core of MacFarlane's compositional semantic proposals for particular expressions are innovative ideas that are independent of relativism *per se*. But this review will focus on the distinctive brand of relativism developed and defended in the book.

To understand MacFarlane's version of relativism, it will help to remind ourselves of a familiar theory of how the content and truth value of a sentence can depend on the context in which it is used. Relative to a context of use  $c$ , a sentence  $S$  expresses a proposition (I will use " $|S|^c$ " to denote the proposition expressed by  $S$  in  $c$ ). Our semantic theory pairs sentences (relative to contexts) with propositions, and tells us under what conditions a proposition is true at a circumstance of evaluation. What MacFarlane calls the *postsemantics* (58) then provides a definition of *truth at a context*: a sentence  $S$  is true at a context of use  $c$  iff  $|S|^c$  is true at the circumstance of evaluation determined by  $c$  (77). What a *circumstance of evaluation* is depends on how we think of propositional truth. If propositions are true or false only relative to a possible world, then a circumstance of evaluation will be a possible world; if propositions are true or false only relative to a possible world and a time, then a circumstance of evaluation will be a pair of a world and time; etc.<sup>2</sup> The circumstance of evaluation *determined by a context*  $c$  results from setting each parameter of the circumstance to the value of the corresponding parameter of the context. So if, for example, circumstances of evaluation are pairs of worlds and times, the circumstance of evaluation determined by a context  $c$  will be the pair consisting of the world of  $c$  and the time of  $c$ . Although the notion of *truth at a context* is usually defined only for sentences, MacFarlane extends this definition to propositions, as follows: Given a sentence  $S$  and context  $c$ , the proposition  $|S|^c$  is true at  $c$  iff  $|S|^c$  is true at the circumstance determined by  $c$  (78).<sup>3</sup>

MacFarlane's version of relativism comes into relief when we compare it with more familiar contextualist theories. A simple version of contextualism about "tasty," for example, might say that, relative to a context of use  $c$ , the sentence "Chili is tasty" expresses the proposition that chili meets the standard of taste possessed by the speaker of  $c$  at the time of  $c$ . Here it is assumed that propositions receive a truth value relative to a possible world. According to this view, when I say, "Chili is tasty," I assert the proposition that chili is tasty according to my present standard of taste; when you utter the negation of that sentence, you assert the proposition that chili is not tasty according to your present standard.

This sort of contextualism – which MacFarlane calls *ordinary* or *indexi-*

---

<sup>2</sup>What if one thinks that, fundamentally, propositions are true or false *simpliciter*, not true or false *relative to* anything (Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009))? Even if this is right, we can define the notion of *truth at a world* in terms of the notion of truth *simpliciter*, as follows: a proposition  $p$  is true at a world  $w$  iff had  $w$  obtained,  $p$  would have been true. One might be able to explain *truth at pair of a world and time* in a similar manner. But if circumstances of evaluation contain more exotic parameters, things might get trickier. See footnote 4.

<sup>3</sup>MacFarlane's definitions of sentential and propositional truth at a context differ slightly from the ones given in this paragraph, in order to accommodate his view that, in a branching time framework, a single context might be contained in multiple possible worlds (77). I ignore this complication for the sake of simplicity.

*cal contextualism* – has been subject to several objections in the literature in connection with its predictions concerning disagreement and (object language) truth and falsity ascriptions. For example, it appears that this view will predict that, in the above case, you and I do not disagree about whether chili is tasty since the proposition I asserted is compatible with the one that you asserted.

In response to problems like this, some authors advocate adopting a view that moves in the direction of MacFarlane's theory, a view which is often called “relativism” in the contemporary literature. On the view in question, propositions receive a truth value only relative to a possible world and a standard of taste. Thus, circumstances of evaluation are pairs consisting of a possible world and a standard of taste.<sup>4</sup> The circumstance determined by a context  $c$  will consist of the world of  $c$  and the standard of taste possessed by the speaker of  $c$  at the time of  $c$  in the world of  $c$  (call this “the standard possessed by the speaker at  $c$ ”). On this view, “Chili is tasty” expresses the same proposition at every context of use, though whether that proposition is true at a context will depend on the standard possessed by the speaker at that context. So on this view, when I utter, “Chili is tasty” and you utter, “Chili is not tasty,” I assert a proposition that is incompatible with the one you assert, in the sense that there is no circumstance of evaluation at which both are true. Advocates of this view argue that this enables them to better accommodate the data concerning disagreement and truth and falsity ascriptions. One reason this view might be considered a version of relativism is that the proposition that chili is tasty might be true relative to my standard (at the present time, in the actual world), but false relative to yours (at the present time, in the actual world).

But MacFarlane thinks that this view – which he calls *nonindexical contextualism* – does not cross the “philosophically interesting line” between relativism and absolutism (60). His reason for saying this is that, for any context  $c$ , the ordinary contextualist and the nonindexical contextualist will agree on whether  $|“Chili is tasty”|^c$  is true at  $c$ : both hold that  $|“Chili is tasty”|^c$  is true at  $c$  iff chili meets the standard possessed by the speaker at  $c$ . They agree on this despite disagreeing over the nature of the proposition expressed by “Chili is tasty.” More generally, for any context  $c$  and any simple taste sentence  $S$ , the ordinary contextualist and the nonindexical contextualist will agree on whether  $|S|^c$  is true at  $c$ .

Why does MacFarlane think agreement on this point is so significant? Because it is the notion of *truth at a context* that has “direct pragmatic relevance,” at least for contextualists (53). For example, contextualists might hold that the notion of *truth at a context* plays a role in characterizing the constitutive norm of assertion:

**Contextualist Assertion Rule.** An agent in context  $c$  is permitted to assert proposition  $p$  only if  $p$  is true at  $c$  (101).

---

<sup>4</sup>As mentioned in footnote 2, the strategy of explaining *truth at a circumstance* in terms of truth *simpliciter* becomes more difficult if circumstances include parameters like standards of taste.

And that notion may also play a role in characterizing the constitutive norm for *retracting* previously made assertions:

**Contextualist Retraction Rule.** An agent in context  $c_2$  is required to retract an (unretracted) assertion of proposition  $p$  made at  $c_1$  if  $p$  is not true at  $c_1$ .<sup>5</sup>

It is these rules that bring the contextualist's account of *truth at a context* into contact with the behavior of actual language users.

Now if we combine these rules with either of the foregoing contextualist views, we get the following prediction. If  $A$  is permitted to assert |“Chili is tasty”| $^c$  in  $c$ , then the above retraction rule will not require her to retract that assertion in a later context  $c'$ , even if her tastes change between  $c$  and  $c'$  in a manner unfavorable to chili.<sup>6</sup> More generally, the ordinary contextualist and the nonindexical contextualist will agree on every question concerning when one is permitted to assert a simple taste claim and when, having made such an assertion, one is required to retract it.<sup>7</sup>

MacFarlane's brand of relativism – *assessment sensitivity* – is different. One way to characterize his view is that the notion with “direct pragmatic relevance” is not the notion of *truth at a context of use*, but rather the notion of *truth at a context of use and a context of assessment*. A context of assessment is simply any situation in which one might potentially assess an assertion; metaphysically speaking, it is the same sort of entity as a context of use (60-61). The assessment relativist and the nonindexical contextualist may share a similar *semantic* theory, i.e. they may agree on which sentences are paired with which propositions, and the conditions under which a proposition is true at a circumstance of evaluation. Where they will disagree is in the postsemantics; instead of the definition of *truth at a context* provided above, the assessment relativist will offer the following definition of *truth at a context of use and a context of assessment*:

A proposition  $p$  is true as used at  $c_1$  and as assessed at  $c_2$  iff  $p$  is true at the circumstance of evaluation determined by  $(c_1, c_2)$ . (90)

To understand this definition, we need to know how a pair of contexts determines a circumstance of evaluation. Like the nonindexical contextualist, the assessment relativist (about taste predicates) holds that propositional truth varies over possible worlds and standards of taste, and so holds that circumstances of

---

<sup>5</sup> MacFarlane does not set out a rule like this explicitly, but some of his remarks suggest that he is concerned with versions of contextualism that endorse a rule like this; see, for example, p. 225. In what follows, I restrict my discussion to versions of contextualism that endorse this rule.

<sup>6</sup> Note that, according to nonindexical contextualism,  $A$  will not be required in  $c'$  to retract her assertion of |“The chili is tasty”| $^c$ , despite the fact that, in  $c'$ , she will rightly regard that proposition as false.

<sup>7</sup> At times, MacFarlane overstates the similarity between ordinary and nonindexical contextualism. For example, he writes that nonindexical contextualism “would agree with ordinary contextualism on every question about the truth of sentences” (89). But as Kölbel (2015) points out, this is not so: the two will, for example, differ over the truth value of some object language truth and falsity ascriptions.

evaluation are pairs of possible worlds and standards of taste. MacFarlane thus offers the following account of how a pair of contexts determines a circumstance of evaluation:

The circumstance of evaluation  $(w, s)$  is the circumstance of evaluation determined by  $(c_1, c_2)$  iff  $w$  is the world of  $c_1$  and  $s$  is the standard of taste possessed by the agent of  $c_2$  at the time of  $c_2$  in the world of  $c_2$ . (90)

Note that each context plays a role in determining a component of the circumstance: the context of use,  $c_1$ , fixes the world component, while the context of assessment,  $c_2$ , fixes the standard of taste. This reflects the fact that, in determining the truth of a simple taste proposition, it will be the assessor's tastes (at the time of assessment) that matter, not necessarily the speaker's.

Now the crucial difference between assessment relativism and its rivals, according to MacFarlane, emerges when look at the norms governing language use. The assessment relativist holds that the following two norms are partly constitutive of assertion and retraction (respectively):

**Relativist Assertion Rule.** An agent in context  $c$  is permitted to assert proposition  $p$  only if  $p$  is true as used at  $c$  and as assessed at  $c$ . (103)

**Relativist Retraction Rule.** An agent in context  $c_2$  is required to retract an (unretracted) assertion of proposition  $p$  made at context  $c_1$  if  $p$  is not true as used at  $c_1$  and as assessed at  $c_2$ . (108)

As MacFarlane observes, given this rule for assertion, it follows that, for any context  $c$ , the relativist will agree with the contextualist on whether an assertion of  $|“Chili\ is\ tasty”|^c$  is permitted in  $c$ : both will agree that such an assertion is permitted only if chili meets the standard possessed by the speaker of  $c$  at the time of  $c$  at the world of  $c$  (105). According to MacFarlane, the difference – indeed the *only* “practical difference” – between noindexical contextualism and relativism emerges when we examine *the conditions under which retraction is required* (107–108). For when combined with the above two rules, assessment relativism predicts that there will be cases in which an agent  $A$  is permitted to assert  $|“Chili\ is\ tasty”|^c$  in  $c$  (because chili meets the standard of taste she possesses at the time of  $c$ ), but is then required to retract that assertion in a later context  $c'$  (because her standard of taste changes between  $c$  and  $c'$  in a manner unfavorable to chili). It is this pattern of permissible assertion followed by required retraction that differentiates assessment relativism from nonindexical contextualism.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Of course, a non-relativist might attempt to accommodate MacFarlane's data by claiming that the the norms of assertion and retraction ought to be stated in terms of (e.g.) *justified belief*, rather than in terms of truth or knowledge. The non-relativist might then attempt to account for that fact that  $A$  is permitted to assert  $|“Chili\ is\ tasty”|^c$  in  $c$  and required to retract it in  $c'$  by claiming that  $A$  was justified in believing that proposition in  $c$ , but

Although MacFarlane does discuss truth and falsity ascriptions and disagreement, he places greater emphasis on retraction. The issue of truth and falsity ascriptions does not differentiate between assessment relativism and nonindexical contextualism, and so does not get to the heart of the matter (106–107). And while MacFarlane does believe the assessment relativist treatment of disagreement is better than what the nonindexical contextualist can offer, he doesn't appear to put much weight on this point (132–133). In a sense, then, what MacFarlane's proposal boils down to is the claim that **Relativist Retraction Rule** is the (or a) constitutive norm of retraction. Whether this is empirically plausible for taste claims and the other expressions MacFarlane discusses is a matter of controversy; MacFarlane argues his case in detail in the second half of the book. But I want to focus on a different question: why is it, according to assessment relativism, that one should retract an assertion that one was permitted to make in the first place?

Often one retracts a past assertion so as not to continue to risk misleading the audience one was addressing at the time of the assertion. Suppose Jones asserts on the stump that his political opponent engaged in voter fraud in 1985, and then later learns that this is not in fact true. The explanation for why Jones ought to retract his assertion will presumably involve the fact that it has the potential to mislead others about his opponent's past actions. Or suppose that I, aware of your gluten allergy, tell you that there is no gluten in a certain dessert on the restaurant's menu. I then come to realize that I don't know for sure that the item in question is gluten-free. Here again the explanation for why I ought to retract my assertion is that my assertion has the potential to mislead you about something important.

But the assessment relativist doesn't appear to be in a position to offer a similar explanation for why we ought to retract assertions that we were permitted to make in the first place. For suppose that, in context  $c$ ,  $A$  is speaking to  $B$ , and  $A$  asserts |“Chili is tasty”| $^c$ . Given the proposed rule of assertion,  $A$ 's assertion is permitted only if chili meets the standard of taste that  $A$  possesses in  $c$ . Let us suppose that  $A$ 's assertion was in fact permissible, i.e. chili really did meet  $A$ 's standard in  $c$ . Now if  $c$  is a normal context, then  $B$  presumably knows under what conditions  $A$ 's assertion complies with the rule of assertion, and  $B$  will assume that  $A$  is attempting to comply with that rule. So  $B$  can infer that  $A$  believes that chili meets the standard that  $A$  possesses in  $c$ . If  $B$  deems  $A$  reliable on this matter, then  $B$  can infer that chili in fact meets the standard that  $A$  possesses in  $c$ .

Now suppose  $A$ 's tastes change between contexts  $c$  and  $c'$ , so that |“Chili is tasty”| $^c$  is false as used at  $c$  and as assessed at  $c'$ . The **Relativist Retraction Rule** obliges  $A$  to retract the assertion she made in  $c$ . But why, exactly, should she do this? It's not that  $A$  has risked misleading  $B$ . For the belief that  $B$  formed on the basis of  $A$ 's assertion was the belief that chili met the standard

---

is no longer justified in believing it in  $c'$ . This view seems most plausible if combined with an objectivist approach to taste claims, a version of which MacFarlane discusses and rejects (2–7).

of taste that  $A$  possessed in  $c$ , and this belief is presumably still true.<sup>9</sup> So the change in  $A$ 's standard of taste doesn't affect the truth of the belief that  $B$  formed on the basis of  $A$ 's assertion.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps  $A$  ought to retract in  $c'$  not because she risks misleading  $B$ , but simply because she ought to signal to  $B$  that her standard of taste has changed between  $c$  and  $c'$ . Given MacFarlane's rule of retraction,  $A$ 's retracting her assertion would indeed send out such a signal. But  $A$  could also accomplish this by making the following speech in  $c'$ : "My standard of taste has changed. Chili is not in fact tasty. What I said earlier was false." On MacFarlane's view, this does not amount to a retraction: a retraction involves explicitly saying, "I take that back" or "I retract that" (108). A retraction targets a previous speech act, not (or not only) the content of that speech act. So we still lack an explanation for why we ought to retract in the cases of interest. Thus, even if MacFarlane is right that our practice of retraction is governed by the **Relativist Retraction Rule**, perhaps it is a practice that we have reason to abandon.<sup>11</sup>

## References

- Cappelen, Herman and Hawthorne, John. 2009. *Relativism and Monadic Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199560554.001.0001.
- Egan, Andy, Hawthorne, John, and Weatherson, Brian. 2005. "Epistemic Modals in Context." In Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter (eds.), *Contextualism in Philosophy*, 131–168. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kölbl, Max. 2002. *Truth Without Objectivity*. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9780203870181.
- . 2004. "Faultless Disagreement." In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, volume 104, 53–73. doi:10.1111/j.0066-7373.2004.00081.x.
- . 2015. "Review of *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications* by John MacFarlane." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*.
- Lasersohn, Peter. 2005. "Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28:643–686. doi:10.1007/s10988-005-0596-x.

---

<sup>9</sup>MacFarlane avoids calling beliefs "true" or "false," preferring the terms "accurate" and "inaccurate" (125). Furthermore, he holds that these notions are not absolute: a belief is only accurate or inaccurate relative to a context of assessment (129). But the content of the belief in question is not assessment sensitive, and so it does no harm to call that belief true *simpliciter*.

<sup>10</sup>We can stipulate that  $B$  has no relevant background beliefs about how  $A$ 's post- $c$  tastes are likely to evolve, so  $B$  will not form any false beliefs about  $A$ 's standard of taste in  $c'$ .

<sup>11</sup>In §12.2 of *Assessment Sensitivity*, MacFarlane argues that it makes sense, given our interests, for us to speak a language in which knowledge attributions are assessment sensitive, and he intends those remarks to generalize to the other expressions he discusses (310). But it is hard to bring what he says on that point into contact with the question I have been pursuing in the last few paragraphs, since he says little about retraction in that section of the book.

- Richard, Mark. 2004. "Contextualism and Relativism." *Philosophical Studies* 119:215–242. doi:10.1023/b:phil.0000029358.77417.df.
- Stephenson, Tamina. 2007. "Judge Dependence, Epistemic Modals, and Predicates of Personal Taste." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30:487 – 525. doi: 10.1007/s10988-008-9023-4.