

Relativism Without Relative Truth

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EPR3
Sydney, 1 July 2011

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1. Introduction

I will argue that

- what is distinctive and attractive about MacFarlane's version of relativism can be understood independently of "relative truth"
- it can instead be understood in terms of a modified version of Brandom's account of assertoric practice.
- this explanation yields a clearer rationale for the distinguishing feature of MacFarlane's relativism: his treatment of retraction.

MacFarlane's three grades of semantic relativism:

<u>Absolutism</u> classical truth- conditional semantics	→	<u>(Mere) use sensitivity</u> “on the safe side of the really interesting line”	→	<u>Assessment sensitivity</u> “interesting and controversial”
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Three grades of pragmatic relativism:

<u>Absolutism</u> Brandom's description of <u>all</u> “fact-stating discourse”	→	<u>(Mere) ass. sensitivity</u> interesting/controversial description of <u>some</u> fact- stating discourse	→	<u>Use sensitivity</u> arguably incoherent as description of <u>any</u> fact- stating discourse
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My proposal is to replace

- claims about characteristics of truth in different discourses by
- claims about differences in the stringency with which discourses embody the full Brandomian “game of giving and asking for reasons.”

(Cf. Price, *FFT*, 1988: no “sharp distinction between fact-stating and non-fact-stating uses of language”)

2. MacFarlane's project

Target: explaining apparent “subjective” functioning of a class of expressions including epistemic modals and such predicates as ‘tasty’ and ‘funny’

- Symptom: Price's “evaporative” disputes, in which one party (once apprised of differences in perspectives) ceases to take there to be anything amiss about (what she continues to regard as) the other party's assertion of what is not the case.

He rejects two explanations that are metaphysically eliminativist about the apparent subject-matter:

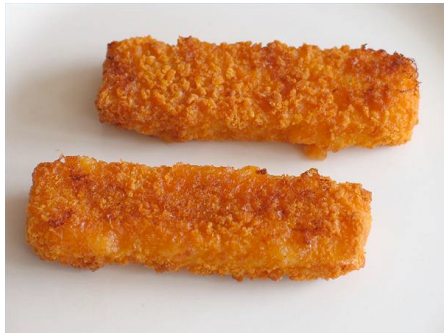
- (1) traditional expressivism
- (2) traditional contextualism

In fact, his metaphysical pronouncements sound indistinguishable from those of an “objectivist.”

“[The predicate] ‘tasty’ invariantly expresses a single property, the property of being tasty.”

MacFarlane on the “property of being tasty”:

Not possessed by:



Yet to be determined:



Possessed by:



To distinguish his view from “objectivism,” MacFarlane focuses on how the target discourses fit into the normative structure of the practice of assertion.

His strategy:

- “start with an account of assertoric force ... that is acceptable to the nonrelativist”
- then generalize it to yield a framework that accommodates our target discourses and illuminates how they differ from “objective” discourses.

One of MacFarlane’s proposed accounts is inspired by Brandom.

- Unlike Brandom’s, his explanations invoke (relativized) truth.
- I will argue that his purposes can be better served by something closer to Brandom’s own account of the normative structure of assertoric practice (suitably generalized).

3. Brandom relativized: first pass

3.1 Brandom on assertion

Asserting is a speech act by which “one not only licenses further assertions on the part of others, but commits oneself to justifying the original claim” (‘Asserting’, 1983)

- Responsibility undertaken: to vindicate one’s entitlement to assert the proposition when appropriately challenged.
- Authority claimed: to license others to vindicate their entitlement to assert the proposition by deferring to one.

Whether such licensing succeeds depends on:

- whether the asserter has the entitlement in question
- whether the audience member has some status that precludes her from inheriting entitlement from the speaker
(one such status: having issued an unretracted denial of the same proposition)

A consequence of Brandom's analysis:

- In denying p , I “void the communicative authority,” claimed in an asserting of p , to entitle me as audience member to assert p . (And I can't take the fault to lie with my own denial.)

So Brandom's analysis accounts for a feature of assertoric practice stressed by Price:

- (3N) If B takes A to have asserted a false proposition, B thereby takes there to be something defective about A's assertion.

Price argues that the practice of assertion can be constitutively explained in terms of the addition of feature (3N) to intelligible practice of proto-assertion via adoption of normative use of 'true' and 'false'.

- I am skeptical.
- But I will propose he is right that there is room for a practice characterized by a qualified version of (3N).

3.2. Relaxing the account

On the relaxed view, the asserter is no longer claiming authority to license assertion of this proposition by all potential audience members.

- Rather, she is licensing assertion by those who occupy a certain perspective (as determined by the proposition asserted).
- Hence, only a challenge from someone occupying that perspective is one she is obliged to respond to.
- Only one who denies the proposition while occupying that perspective need take there to be anything defective about the assertion.

Assertion of certain kinds of propositions carries its licensing potential vis-à-vis a restricted target audience defined by a perspective.

- But, I will argue, the perspective that defines the relevant target audience need not be fixed by its relation to the perspective of the asserter at the time of the assertion.

4. What is assessment sensitivity?

4.1 The polyadicity of the truth predicate

MacFarlane's exposition suggests:

non-relativist theory may operate with dyadic predicate $True(p, c)$

relativist theory requires triadic predicate $True(p, c_1, c_2)$

Relativism requires assessment sensitivity, which requires that p needs to be evaluated for whether or not $True(p, c_u, c_a)$.

- Assessment sensitivity does not concern status of proposition t_p that assesses p as true (in ordinary monadic sense).
- It's not enough that t_p needs to be evaluated for whether or not $True(t_p, c_{u^*})$, where u^* is the context at which t_p is used.
- Slogan: use sensitivity of assessments isn't assessment sensitivity.

I think this is misleading:

- The slogan is right, but assessment sensitivity doesn't actually require additional relativization of the truth predicate.
- Instead, it's a matter of how the truth predicate gets employed in an account of assertoric practice.

4.2 MacFarlane's norms of assertion, simplified

(Ass) An agent is permitted to assert p in context c_u only if $\text{True}(p, c_u)$.

(Ret) An agent in context c_a is required to retract an assertion of p she made in an earlier context c_u if it is not the case that $\text{True}(p, c_a)$.

This should count as “assessment sensitivity” (and relativism):

Norms that apply to an assertion of p in a given context can involve the truth of p relative to a second context in which the assertion is assessed.

In other words:

- Not important that the theory requires a semantic predicate ‘true as used at c_u and assessed from c_a ’.
- It's enough that the theory requires a pragmatic predicate ‘must be retracted when used at c_u and assessed from c_a ’.

NOTICE: whether an assertion is true as assessed by another agent plays no role in MacFarlane's account!

4.3 Use-sensitivity and the triadic truth predicate

MacFarlane formulates retraction norm using triadic truth predicate:

(Ret*) An agent in context c_a is required to retract an assertion of p she made in an earlier context c_u if it is not the case that $True(p, c_u, c_a)$.

Reason: if there are contents that are “use sensitive,” our simplified (Ret) requires too many retractions.

Example: time-neutral propositions.

Consider p = the prop. *that it is raining in Sydney and Tasty is tasty*.

Whether I must retract yesterday's assertion of p depends on my tastes today (ass. sensitivity) but yesterday's weather (use sensitivity).

So we need the triadic predicate $True(p, c_u, c_a)$ provided

(US) There is a proposition p such that the same agent, in the same world, may affirm and deny p at different times (and retract neither speech act) without incurring any normative deficiency.

I will be urging an account of assertoric practice that essentially involves ‘propositions’ for which (US) is ruled out.

5. A problem: motivating MacFarlane's retraction norm

Why might there be a practice of assertion that essentially involves a norm like (Ret)? What difference does this norm make to the kind of speech act that is governed by it?

- An attractive answer is suggested by Brandom's description of assertion as an endorsement that remains in effect until withdrawn.

5.1 A first attempt

There are two ways MacFarlane can be seen as appealing to this picture, corresponding to two ways he understands assertion as “making oneself responsible” for a proposition's truth.

- (1) One may undertake to accept responsibility for one's conduct (in making the assertion), in the event the proposition is shown untrue.

This is making oneself responsible as a guarantor.

- (2) One may accept justificatory responsibility for the proposition's truth.

This is making oneself responsible as a vindicator.

Understood either way, undertaking the responsibility is flip side of authorizing one's audience to rely on the proposition's truth.

Can MacFarlane use either of these conceptions of asserting as undertaking responsibility to motivate his retraction norm?

Suppose someone at c_u either guarantees or undertakes to vindicate p 's truth relative to any subsequent context c_a .

- If, at some c_a , it is not the case that $True(p, c_a)$, her continuing commitment as guarantor or vindicator becomes inappropriate, and retraction will be in order.
- This motivates the norm (Ret).

MacFarlane himself doesn't officially derive a retraction norm from the endorsement account.

- Rather, he proposes that "the commitment one undertakes in making an assertion includes" a commitment to retract when it is shown not to be the case that $True(p, c_a)$.
- Circularity worry?

So have we succeeded in motivating assessment sensitivity?

5.2 The problem

As noted, the contexts c_u and c_a referred to in (Ret) are always occupied by the asserter.

- Yet we were trying to derive a retraction norm from Brandom's guiding thought that asserting is issuing an endorsement for one's audience to rely on.

But could there be any point to a practice that involved endorsing (say) the proposition *that Tasty is tasty* as true relative to the context of each audience member?

MacFarlane is clear about this. All he claims is

In asserting p in context c_u , an agent undertakes to provide, for any context c_a the agent occupies in which the assertion is properly challenged, grounds for its being the case that $True(p, c_a)$.

Problem: we have now failed to derive retraction norm from Brandom's conception of asserting as endorsing for others.

6. A solution: assertoric force relativism

6.1 The proposal

An asserter of p claims authority to license assertion of p by any audience member who occupies a context relevantly similar (as fixed by p) to any context occupied by the asserter at any subsequent time.

Consequences for retraction

We get two analogues of (Ret):

(Ret_{prag}) If an agent can't currently vindicate entitlement to assert a proposition she previously asserted, she should retract that assertion.

The second analogue is based on a weakened version of Price's principle (3N)

(3N_{rel}) If B takes A to have asserted a false claim, and B takes herself to belong to the audience vis-à-vis which A's assertion claims entitlement-transmitting authority, then B takes there to be something defective about A's assertion.

(Ret*_{prag}) If an agent takes herself to have asserted a false claim, she takes there to be something defective about her assertion.

6.2 Degrees of pragmatic relativism

1. Brandom's objectivism: endorsement of propositions is directed at the whole community of potential audience members.

2. My "assessment sensitive" proposal: endorsement of certain propositions can be directed at restricted target audiences, but under the condition that such a target audience always includes the original asserter at all future times.

- Assertion thus always involves sticking one's neck out with respect to one's own future contexts.

3. "Use sensitivity": endorsement of propositions may be directed at target audiences (picked out by, e.g., standards of taste) that don't meet the above condition.

- Such a practice resembles that of Price's fictional "merely opinionated asserters," who never construe their "denials" of each other's "assertions" as criticism.
- I suspect that a practice characterized by "use sensitivity" is no more recognizable as a practice of asserting propositions, a "game of giving and asking for reasons."