

Family Feuds? Relativism, Expressivism, and Disagreements about Disagreement

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John MacFarlane has wondered whether relativism is expressivism done right. ... In contrast, I would venture ... that it is worth taking seriously the idea that expressivism is relativism done right. (Schroeder 2015, 25).

1. Introduction

In this piece I want to compare my own version of expressivism with John MacFarlane's relativism. The terms expressivism and relativism are widely used by other writers, of course, with a variety of positions in mind, in each case. To be clear that my concern is with the comparison between my view and MacFarlane's, it will be helpful to have some specific labels. I'll talk about 'MacFarlane's relativism' (MR) and 'my expressivism' (ME) – drawing on my own work and MacFarlane's, as we go along, to explain the features of each that I take to be relevant. In my case, it will be my expressivist views *about truth* that will do most of the work, though I will also explain what I take expressivism in general to be. This will allow me, at the end of the paper, to ask a relativised version of Schroeder's question: Could ME be MR done right?

As we'll see, my intuitions are similar to MacFarlane's at many points. Hence 'family feuds' in my title, and the interest in exploring this comparison, from my point of view. In philosophy, as in a family, small disagreements often loom large; but for good reason, at least in philosophy, because they are often the most productive. Here, disagreement also looms large in a different sense. Both for MacFarlane and for me, a central motivation is to explain some of the phenomenology of linguistic disagreements. The upshot is that some of our family ties, and much of the remaining feud, turn on questions about disagreement itself.

What does this have to do with inferentialism and naturalism? One of the central concerns of philosophical naturalism, on both sides of the argument, is with topics that seem hard to 'place' in a naturalistic worldview. Years ago I called some of these topics the 'M-worlds': morality, modality, meaning, and mathematics, for example ('Naturalism and the fate of the M-worlds', Price 1997). In all these cases, and others like them, there are a number of standard responses to such 'placement problems'. Short of abandoning these vocabularies altogether, we can reject naturalism, argue for a more liberal or inclusive naturalism, or find clever ways to make them fit. Under the last heading, one popular move is to argue that some of the topics concerned involve an element of *subjectivity* – in some sense, they reflect our own perspective, rather than any entirely objective aspect of the world. We didn't see them in the natural world because we were looking in the wrong place, as it were.

ME and MR are two different ways of making this last move. In this way, they both take an interest in intersections between subjectivity and objectivity, and both can be seen as motivated in part by naturalism, and the placement problems that come with it. Expressivism, at least, has

an obvious family connection to inferentialism, and more generally in the approach to understanding the meaning of our words in *pragmatic* rather than *semantic* terms – in terms of what *we do with them*, and *how we use them*, rather than in terms of semantic notions such as truth conditions. From my perspective, MR lies on the other side of this particular fence, in that it does give a more central role to truth conditions. Nevertheless, as we'll see, it does so in ways that are sensitive to pragmatic questions about what we do with truth, and in that sense congenial both to ME and inferentialism generally. As we'll also see, this common interest connects my comparison of ME and MR to some of the other themes in this volume.

The paper goes like this. I'll begin with remarks from Lionel Shapiro (2014), who notes similarities between the concerns of my work and that of MacFarlane and other 'New Relativists'. I'll then follow MacFarlane's own presentation of MR, highlighting parallels with my own view, and my motivations for it. Among other things, I'll note that we have a common opponent, in the view he calls *contextualism*. I have opposed a similar view under a different name, *response-dependent realism* (RDR), and some of our objections to these views are also strikingly similar. We both appeal, in particular, to the need to handle a balance of subjectivity and objectivity in the cases in question – more on what we mean by this below.

MacFarlane notes an early argument of this kind of mine (Price 1983a), offered in support of what I would then have called a *nonfactualist* account of probability claims. These days I would call it an expressivist account. MacFarlane thinks that as a point against contextualism my argument is a good one, but that it overlooks his own relativist strategy for explaining the phenomena in question. This will be a suitable point to say what I now take expressivism in general to involve. As I'll explain, I take it to be a recipe with several ingredients.

Returning to MacFarlane's presentation of relativism as an alternative to contextualism, we will come to the main points of disagreement between MR and ME. As I said, these concern disagreement itself. I'll offer two main objections to MR, one narrow and one broad. The narrow objection concerns the explanation of disagreement in cases involving a degree of subjectivity – e.g., predicates of taste, to use one of MacFarlane's main examples. MacFarlane thinks his view handles these cases satisfactorily, but I disagree. I think that MR fails to provide an adequate explanation of the actual character of such disagreements.

The broad objection concerns the explanation of disagreement in regular cases, in which the relevant kind of subjectivity is not in play. About these, I think that there is an explanatory burden that MacFarlane misses, or at any rate greatly underestimates. To be fair, MacFarlane is in excellent company at this point. The explanatory burden in question is on few people's radar. To explain how it came to be on mine, and how I have proposed to discharge it, I'll dig into early work from the same period as the piece MacFarlane cites. At that time, as I'll explain, I took myself to be responding to questions raised by Dummett, in his work on truth, a generation earlier (Dummett 1959). This motivation is relevant here because it is one that MacFarlane shares – he, too, wants to stand on Dummett's shoulders. By tracing the development of my own views from those Dummett-inspired roots, I'll explain what I think that MacFarlane is missing about linguistic truth and linguistic disagreement.

After this lengthy exploration of the ways in which MR and ME differ, I'll close, more briefly, by emphasising some further respects in which they are on the same page. Here Shapiro's (2014) discussion will be helpful again. I'll compare MR to my general recipe for expressivism described earlier, and ask in particular how it differs as a strategy for addressing placement problems in the light of naturalism. Despite our disagreements about disagreement, my conclusion will be that MR and ME are actually very close. By my lights, in fact, MacFarlane actually is an expressivist, in most of the ways that matter.

2. Shapiro on subjectivity and evaporative disputes

Shapiro (2014) notes similarities between the goals of relativism and of some of my work. His description of the key linguistic phenomena, linking ME and MR in this way, provides a convenient point of entry for our present comparison:

The goal of advocates of relativist semantics has been to explain the apparently distinctive functioning of a wide-ranging class of expressions. As my examples, I will take epistemic modals such as 'it's possible that ...' and so-called predicates of personal taste such as 'tasty' and 'fun'. At issue is the way their use appears to have a subjective or perspectival aspect. ...

The key phenomenon is pointed to in Huw Price's ... *Facts and the Function of Truth* (1988), which deserves to be recognized as a close precursor to the current discussion of relativism. This is the seeming possibility of what Price calls "evaporative disputes," which he says "populate the margins of factual discourse" (1988: 159ff). Price himself focuses on disputes over whether something is probable, but his observations apply equally to disputes involving epistemic possibility and predicates of personal taste. Here are two examples:

- Two physicians, Dr. Adams and Dr. Brown, are discussing a mutual patient. Adams says: 'It's possible the patient has Lyme disease'. Brown protests: 'no, that's not possible! You must be misinterpreting the test results.'
- Two friends, Alice and Ben, are discussing which cheeses to buy for a party. Alice says: 'Limburger is a tasty cheese. My sister told me so.' Ben replies: 'Did she really? I've tried it, and it's not tasty at all!'

To all appearances, both examples satisfy the following schematic description:

- i. one party has affirmed, and the other has denied, that *P*,
- ii. both parties recognize (i), and
- iii. each takes (i) to mean that there is something *mistaken* about the other's speech act.

Suppose the appearances are correct and (i)-(iii) are satisfied. In a familiar sense, this suffices for the parties to be *engaged in a dispute about whether P*. Thus Adams and Brown are engaged in a dispute about whether it's possible the patient has Lyme disease, and Alice and Ben are engaged in a dispute about whether Limburger cheese is tasty.

Imagine, now, that Adams and Brown discover that only Brown has seen the most recent test results ruling out their patient's having Lyme disease. according to Price, (ii) will continue to obtain. In particular, Brown will continue to regard Adams as having affirmed that it is possible that the patient has Lyme disease. Yet (iii) now seems to fail: each will cease to regard the other's assertion about the patient as mistaken in any way. In particular, Brown will not merely excuse Adams's mistake as blameless given Adams's uninformed perspective (Price 1988: 162–163). Rather, in view of that perspective, Brown will cease taking Adams to have made any mistake, *even though* Brown takes Adams to have described something as possible that is not in fact possible. What was formerly a dispute about whether it's possible that the patient has Lyme disease has *evaporated*—or so it has seemed to Price and his relativist heirs. (Shapiro 2014, 141–142)

Shapiro develops his own proposal for dealing with these cases, within the framework of Brandom's account of the norms of assertion. We'll return to Shapiro's proposal towards the end of the paper, but for the most part I'll focus on the comparison between my view and MacFarlane's. Let's turn to MacFarlane's own account.

3. 'Falling short of being fully objective' – MacFarlane's motivations for MR

MacFarlane says that relativism 'is a good tool for understanding parts of our thought and talk that fall short of being fully objective.' (2014, *v*) Here is his introduction to the project, from a chapter called 'A Taste of Relativism'.

You bite into a fresh apple. It is the tart kind that you particularly like, and it is perfectly ripe. "Tasty," you say, without a moment's hesitation. But what did you *mean* by that? What, exactly, are you saying about the apple? I have found that people tend to give one of three kinds of answers:

Objectivism I am saying that the apple has an objective property, the property of being tasty, that I can detect perceptually. This is the same property others attribute when they use the word "tasty." Whether the apple has this property is a simple matter of fact, independent of perspective.

Contextualism I am saying that the apple strikes me in a certain way, or is pleasing to my tastes, or to the tastes of a group with which I identify. The word "tasty" is contextually sensitive, so that my use of it ascribes the property of being pleasing to me or my tastes, while your use of the same word would ascribe a different property: the property of being pleasing to *you* or your tastes.

Expressivism I am not asserting anything at all about the apple.¹ I am just expressing my liking of its flavor—something I could have done nonverbally by smiling and licking my lips. This is different from *saying* that I like its flavour.

I think that there is something right about each of these answers: each captures something about the use of “tasty.” But there is also something wrong about each of them. It is as if all three have part of the truth; we just need to synthesize them into a view that has all of their advantages and none of their disadvantages. The task of this book is to make such a view available, not just to illuminate our puzzle about “tasty,” but to make sense of our thought and talk about what people know, what will happen tomorrow, what might be the case, and what we ought to do. (2014, 1)

Contextualism thus puts a mention of our own responses – in this case, taste responses – into the truth conditions of ‘That’s tasty’. In doing so, of course, it hopes to capture the sense that there is something subjective about *tasty*. One manifestation of this subjectivity is that we seem to have immediate access to whether things are tasty, in normal circumstances. In other words, as MacFarlane puts it, the use of ‘tasty’ is governed by a principle something like this:

TP. *If you know first-hand how something tastes, call it “tasty” just in case its flavor is pleasing to you, and “not tasty” just in case its flavor is not pleasing to you.* (2014, 4)

A familiar objection to objectivism is that it cannot make sense of TP:

Perhaps, the objectivist might reply, each of us believes that our own propensities to take pleasure in food are sensitive to the property of tastiness, even if others’ are not. We all think we have won the lottery and acquired a sense of taste that tracks objective tastiness. That would explain our adherence to *TP* in the face of widespread and evident disagreement in taste. But to say this would be to attribute an unreflective chauvinism to every competent speaker. What basis do we have for taking our own gustatory pleasure to be better correlated with tastiness than anyone else’s? (2014, 4–5; here, and throughout the paper, I use underlining for emphasis in quotations)

This problem provides a motivation for contextualism:

Short of positing chauvinism, how might we explain why speakers think that liking the taste of something is sufficient grounds for calling it “tasty”? A natural explanation is that “tasty,” as used by a speaker *S*, is true of just those things whose flavor *S* likes. (2014, 7)

However, MacFarlane continues:

¹ For future reference, I note that this isn’t an accurate characterisation of my own version of expressivism, nor, in my view, of the current views of expressivists such as Blackburn (1993), Gibbard (2003), Dreier (2004) and Schroeder (2015). Like me, all of these authors are happy to say that I am asserting that the apple is tasty. Their expressivism lies in the materials allowed in an account of *what it is* to assert that the apple is tasty, the crucial thing being that the property of being tasty plays no significant explanatory role. I don’t mean to imply that MacFarlane doesn’t know this – later he discusses such views, particularly Gibbard’s, under the heading ‘Modern expressivism’ (2014, §7.3.1).

[C]ontextualism about “tasty” faces two serious problems: it cannot account for agreement and disagreement about what is “tasty,” and it cannot explain why speakers are willing to retract earlier assertions made using “tasty” when their tastes have changed. (2014, 8)

More on retraction below. Concerning agreement and disagreement, MacFarlane puts the objection like this:

If the truth of my claim that a food is “tasty” depends on how it strikes *me*, while the truth of your claim that the same food is “not tasty” depends on how it strikes *you*, then our claims are compatible, and we do not disagree in making them. But it seems that we *do* disagree—even if we are aware that the source of our disagreement is our differing tastes. (2014, 8)

He notes a standard response:

The contextualist might ... accept that there is disagreement, and try to explain it by taking the argument place for an experiencer (or taste) to be filled, not by the speaker herself (or her own idiosyncratic taste), but by a group including the speaker and her audience (or a standard of taste that is somehow shared by them). If in [the exchange – *A*: ‘Licorice is tasty’; *B*: ‘You’re mistaken, it’s not tasty’ –] *A* is asserting that licorice [tastes good] to the whole group—to *A*, *B*, and other relevant participants in the conversation—then we can readily understand *B* as joining issue with what *A* said. *B* knows that licorice does not taste good to *him*, and that is good grounds for disagreeing with the claim that licorice tastes good to the whole group.

The problem with this move is that it loses *TP*. If claims about what is “tasty” are often claims about what is tasty to a group, then it is unclear why finding the food pleasing oneself should be sufficient warrant for claiming that it is “tasty.” (2014, 12)

In other words, says MacFarlane, it ‘appears that vindicating the *TP* requires that the extra argument place be filled solipsistically, while explaining disagreement requires that it be filled collectively.’ (2014, 13)

Later, MacFarlane describes this ‘problem of *lost disagreement*’ as the ‘Achilles’ heel of contextualism’ (2014, 118). He goes on to say that ‘a primary selling point of relativist views against contextualist ones is that they purport to capture the subjectivity of claims of taste without losing the disagreement’² (2014, 118). One of my criticisms of MR will be that this

² Here is the passage in full:

The Achilles’ heel of contextualism is the problem of *lost disagreement*. If in saying “That’s tasty” Yum is asserting that the food tastes good to her, and in saying “That’s not tasty” Yuk is asserting that it doesn’t taste good to him, then their claims are compatible and it is mysterious why they should regard themselves as disagreeing. Sophisticated contextualists attempt to regain the lost disagreement by taking “tasty” to express the property of tasting good to a contextually relevant, or to a suitably idealized version of the speaker. But ... such moves face a dilemma. If the group is kept small and surveyable, and the idealization mild, then it is always possible to find cases of apparent disagreement it will not explain. But if we expand the group (or idealization) far enough to capture all the apparent disagreement, we can no longer

selling point turns out to be bogus – relativism *also* loses disagreement, in the sense that matters most.

4. ME on ‘the peculiar mix of objectivity and subjectivity’

When MacFarlane turns to epistemic modals, he notes that in (Price 1983a), I offer the analogous point about probability. In my case, it was an argument for what I then called ‘nonfactualism’, which was essentially what Yalcin (2012) has called ‘credal expressivism’. MacFarlane says:

If these arguments seem familiar, perhaps it’s because they’ve been made before. Consider how Price (1983a) argues against truth-conditional treatments of “probably.” First, he points out that we do not treat claims about what is “probable” as claims about what is likely given the *speaker’s* evidence:

If I disagree with your claim that it is probably going to snow, I am not disagreeing that given *your* evidence it is likely that this is so; but indicating what follows from *my* evidence. Indeed, I might *agree* that it is probably going to snow and yet think it false that this follows from your evidence. (Price 1983a, 403)

He then notes that if we fix this problem by expanding the relevant body of evidence to include evidence that is available in principle, we can no longer understand how speakers take themselves to be justified in making the probability judgments they do.

Consider the surgeon who says, ‘Your operation has probably been successful. We could find out for sure, but since the tests are painful and expensive, it is best to avoid them.’ The accessibility, in principle, of evidence which would override that on which the [probability] judgement is based, is here explicitly acknowledged. (405)

If we look at when speakers make “probably” claims, we are pushed toward a solipsistic semantics, while if we look at third-party assessments of such claims, we are pushed toward something more objective. The upshot is that there is no way of filling in the *X* in “Given evidence *X*, it is probable that *q*” that would yield plausible truth conditions for the unqualified “It is probable that *q*.”

Price takes these arguments to show that “probably” does not contribute to the propositional content of a speech act at all. His view is that “probably” contributes to the *force* of a speech act, not its content. (MacFarlane 2014, 248–249)

My views on this last point were soon to change. By the time I published *Facts and the Function of Truth* (Price 1988; hereafter FFT), I had come to the view that although ‘probably’ does contribute to propositional content, the way in which it does so needs to be explained in

understand how speakers could regard themselves as suitably placed to make the relevant assertions in the first place. A primary selling point of relativist views against contextualist ones is that they purport to capture the subjectivity of claims of taste without losing the disagreement. (MacFarlane 2014, 118)

pragmatist or expressivist terms – and I had rejected the view, taken for granted in (Price 1983a), that there is a division among our judgements between those that need to be understood in this way, and those that are simply ‘descriptive’. In other words, I had rejected what Robert Kraut (1990) labelled the *Bifurcation Thesis*, becoming what I would later call a *global* expressivist. More below on what this amounts to. For the moment, emphasising the respects in which my path ran parallel to MacFarlane’s, I turn to my criticism of response-dependent realism (RDR).

When FFT appeared in 1988, there was growing interest in so-called *response-dependent* concepts. The key ideas were introduced by Crispin Wright and Mark Johnston, in papers that were eventually to appear in (Haldane and Wright 1993). At ANU, where I was based in 1988–89, these ideas were taken up by Peter Menzies and Philip Pettit, amongst others. Pettit characterised the notion like this:

There are many different accounts of the distinction between primary quality and secondary quality concepts. But one thing is generally agreed. Secondary quality concepts *implicate subjects* in a way primary quality concepts do not. Consider the concepts of smoothness, blandness, and redness. They are tailor-made for creatures like us who are capable, as many intelligences may not be, of certain responses: capable of finding things smooth to the touch, bland to the taste, red to the eye. The concepts, as we may say, are response-dependent. They are fashioned for beings with a capacity for certain responses and it is hard to see how creatures which lacked that capacity could get a proper, first-hand grasp of the concepts. (Pettit 1991, 587)

To me, however, it seemed that this starting point took us quickly to a fork in the road, and that Wright, Johnston, Pettit, and others writing about the topic were systematically blind to one of the options. ‘Two Paths to Pragmatism’ (Price 1991) was my attempt to call attention to the fork, and to argue the case for the other path.

The sense in which both paths lead to pragmatism is that both incorporate a subjective or ‘human’ element – as Pettit puts it, ‘a capacity for certain responses’ – into their account of the concepts concerned. The fork turns on the fact that there are two different ways of incorporating such elements. The ‘response theorists’, as I called them, put the subjective element into the foreground, into an account of the *content* of the claims concerned. Typically this proceeds by specifying the *truth conditions* for the claims in question, where these truth conditions involve the subjective element. The alternative approach, what I would now call expressivism,³ puts the subjective element into the background, into an account of *when* or *how* such claims are appropriately or typically made. (More in a moment on the options here.)

I offer several arguments for preferring expressivism to RDR. Among other things, I say,

the usage approach gives a more accurate explanation of some of the subtleties of ordinary language. In particular, it makes much better sense than its content-based rival

³ Post FFT, as I have said, this was already for me a global expressivism, and some of my arguments against RDR turn on its inability to handle ‘globalisation’.

of the peculiar mix of objectivity and subjectivity we encounter in discourses subject to no-fault disagreements. (1991, 88)

By no-fault disagreements, I mean the sort of cases described by Shapiro, in which an *apparent* disagreement turns out to rest on the fact that in some relevant sense, two speakers occupy different standpoints – for example, in the probability case, that they have access to different bodies of evidence. The following passage gives a flavour of my objections to RDR, and shows how similar they were to MacFarlane’s objections to contextualism.⁴

[Proponents of RDR] thus face the following dilemma. If they leave out the notion of normality [i.e., in MacFarlane’s terms, choose the solipsistic alternative], the resulting account is insufficiently objective to make sense of ordinary *prima facie* disagreements about the matters in question. If they put in normality [i.e., in MacFarlane’s terms, choose the collective alternative], on the other hand, the account cannot make sense of the very real possibility of no-fault disagreements, arising in cases in which there is statistically significant divergence in patterns of response. (1991, 105–106)

There is a difference between MacFarlane and me in what we take our opponent’s problem to be, for the collective alternative. For MacFarlane it is the inability to make sense of TP, for me the inability to make sense of no-fault disagreements. But these clearly originate in the same place: viz., in the sense of first-person authority that TP captures. There is also a difference, of course, in what we take the preferable alternative to be, to the view we are criticising: for me, it was what I would now call expressivism; for MacFarlane, it is MR. (By my lights, as we’ll see, MR joins RDR in taking the wrong path at the fork – in trying to incorporate subjective elements into *truth conditions*, rather than into an account of how the claims in question are *used*.)

What do I mean by expressivism? I now think of it as a recipe with about five main ingredients. One important ingredient is the one just mentioned, a ‘use-first’ approach to meaning. Expressivism focusses on how words are *used*, rather than what they are *about*. I have a rather

⁴ Here are two more passages from (Price 1991) to reinforce these parallels.

Many discourses handle these no-fault disagreements surprisingly smoothly. We are able to ‘switch off’ the objective mode sufficiently to accommodate such irreconcilable differences, without seriously undermining its useful application in ordinary cases. We thus combine objectivity with a certain tolerance of subjectivity (or relativity). (In *Facts and the Function of Truth* I tried to explain this in terms of an account of what in general the objective mode is *for*.) A usage-based account can readily make sense of this feature of language, but a content-based theory is bound to be torn between the objective and subjective aspects of practice. (1991, 107)

Depending on the version of the response theory on offer, the task may be to explain apparent objectivity or apparent subjectivity. If [MacFarlane’s ‘solipsistic’ option] is the preferred reading of moral judgements, for example, then the problem will be to explain the possibility of moral disagreement: to explain why ‘X is good’ and ‘X is bad’ are normally taken to be incompatible, even when uttered by different speakers. ... Alternatively, if the preferred content-based response theory errs towards [MacFarlane’s collective option], the task will be to account for the apparent subjectivity of no-fault disagreements. (1991, 108)

broader conception of the factors the relevant accounts of use are allowed to involve than many expressivists. I think it is unhelpful to restrict them to psychological states, as opposed to more general aspects of speakers' circumstances.

A second ingredient is a programme that presents itself as an alternative to reductive metaphysics. It can be motivated in the same way by so-called placement problems, but combines an insistence that these be regarded as *primarily* linguistic or psychological issues – Why do we talk or think this way? – with a renunciation of the 'representational' moves that lead from there back to metaphysics (e.g., that of seeking 'truthmakers', in some non-deflationary sense).

The third ingredient, closely linked to the first and second, is an explanatory programme. It aims, roughly speaking, to account for the *existence* and *practical relevance* of the vocabularies in question; typically the former in terms of the latter, in some way. Why do creatures like us employ these terms and concepts? And why do these terms and concepts exhibit distinctive links to various aspects of our practical lives? I call the latter question the *Practical Relevance Constraint* (Price and Weslake, 2010; Price 2023, ch. 11), and argue that it is often a great advantage of expressivism over various rivals that it meets it so easily – we'll meet an example of this below (§12).

The fourth ingredient, closely linked again to the third and first, rests on identification of *features of speakers* – typically features of practical or 'pragmatic' significance – that play characteristic roles in expressivist accounts of particular vocabularies. I have called these features the *pragmatic grounds* of the vocabularies in question (Price 2019, 146).

The fifth ingredient, finally, is a kind of perspectivalism, with the pragmatic grounds of a vocabulary playing the role of the perspective from which the users of that vocabulary speak. I link this ingredient to the Copernican metaphor familiar from Kant, noting how well it characterises the sense in which expressivism provides an alternative to metaphysics. What we took to be in need of *metaphysical* investigation is instead explained as a perspectival matter, in which features of our own situation carry the main explanatory burden.

For the bulk of this piece, one particular application of this recipe will be particularly relevant, namely, my expressivist approach to truth. It plays a foundational role for me, and for ME, in a way I'll explain as we go along. But at the end of the paper I'll return to this five-ingredient recipe, and ask how many of the ingredients are shared with MR.

5. Taking it back

Another difference between MR and ME is that MacFarlane emphasises a feature of these cases that I do not discuss directly, namely, the fact that they are cases in which we often *retract* or *take back* a previous assertion, when our standpoint changes.

When our own tastes change, so that a food we used to find pleasant to the taste now tastes bad, we may say that we were mistaken in saying that the food was "tasty." When I was a kid, I once told my mother, "Fish sticks are tasty." Now that I have exposed my palate to a broader range of tastes, I think I was wrong about that; I've changed my mind

about the tastiness of fish sticks. So, if someone said, “But you said years ago that fish sticks were tasty,” I would retract the earlier assertion. I wouldn’t say, “They were tasty then, but they aren’t tasty any more,” since that would imply that their taste changed. Nor would I say, “When I said that, I only meant that they were tasty to me then.” I *didn’t* mean that. At the time I took myself to be disagreeing with adults who claimed that fish sticks weren’t tasty. (2014, 13–14)

Accounting for the phenomenon of retraction is a major motivation for MacFarlane’s account. Among his *desiderata* he lists the following pair:

Assertion conditions. Our account should explain why speakers who know first-hand how something tastes are warranted in calling something tasty just in case its flavor is pleasing to them (*TP*)

Retraction conditions. Our account should explain why speakers will retract (rather than stand by) an earlier assertion that something was tasty, if the flavor the thing had at the time of the assertion is not pleasing to their *present* tastes—even if it was pleasing to the tastes they had then. (2014, 22)

MacFarlane argues that because contextualism assumes ‘that a particular occurrence of “tasty,” used in a particular context, has its extension absolutely’ (2014, 22), it cannot satisfy both *Assertion conditions* and *Retraction conditions* – whereas relativism does have the flexibility to do this.⁵

MacFarlane suggests that the relativist move also gives us traction on a third *desideratum*:

Disagreement. Our account should explain how there can be genuine disagreements about whether something is tasty, even when both parties have first-hand knowledge of its flavor and know that its flavor is pleasing to one of them but not the other. (2014, 22)

He proposes that the relativism gets us this too:

⁵ This is how MacFarlane puts this point:

In considering the options for contextualism, we have been tacitly assuming that a particular occurrence of “tasty,” used in a particular context, has its extension absolutely. This makes it impossible to jointly satisfy *Assertion conditions* and *Retraction conditions*, which seem to put incompatible constraints on this extension: the former requires it to depend on the speaker’s tastes at the time the assertion is made, while the latter requires it to depend on the speaker’s tastes at the time retraction is being considered. What if we say, instead, that assigning an extension to an occurrence of “tasty” requires not just fixing the facts about the context in which it is *used*, but also fixing the facts about the context in which it is being *assessed*? We could then say that a single occurrence of “This is tasty,” used by a particular speaker in relation to a particular food, is true as assessed from the context in which it is used, but false as assessed from a later context (after the speaker’s tastes have changed). And that would open up space to say that the assertion conditions of “This is tasty” are keyed to the speaker’s tastes at the time the assertion is made, while the retraction conditions of an earlier assertion of “This is tasty” are keyed to the speaker’s *current* tastes, even if they have changed since she made the assertion. (MacFarlane 2014, 22–23)

In addition, we would be able to say that two parties who dispute whether a food is tasty genuinely disagree, in the sense that both parties occupy a perspective from which the other's assertion is untrue. (2014, 23)

We'll come back to this claim below, first some more details on retraction. Later, MacFarlane characterises the rule needed for retraction as follows:

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

By “retraction,” I mean the speech act one performs in saying “I take that back” or “I retract that.” The target of a retraction is another speech act, which may be an assertion, a question, a command, an offer, or a speech act of another kind. The effect of retracting a speech act is to “undo” the normative changes effected by the original speech act. So, for example, in retracting a question, one releases the audience from an obligation to answer it, and in retracting an offer, one withdraws a permission that one has extended. Similarly, in retracting an assertion, one disavows the assertoric commitment undertaken in the original assertion. This means, among other things, that one is no longer obliged to respond to challenges to the assertion (since one has already conceded, in effect), and that others are no longer entitled to rely on one's authority for the accuracy of this assertion. (One can, of course, still be held morally accountable if others relied on one's assertion before they knew that it was retracted.) (2014, 108)

As I said, retraction does a lot of work in MacFarlane's account:

[T]he retraction norm is all we need to understand the difference between relativism and all forms of contextualism. Even the interpersonal relation of disagreement can be understood ... in terms of norms for assertion and retraction. (2014, 111)

It will be helpful below to have a couple of examples of retraction of my own. One familiar context in which we often retract speech acts (and indeed other kinds of acts) is when we have to choose between mutually exclusive options. Often, such situations allow us some opportunity to change our minds. When we do so, the fact that the options are mutually exclusive requires that we retract our earlier choice.

Thus, imagine that I am choosing my dessert in a restaurant. I spot the panna cotta, and ask the waiter for that. But then my wife orders it too, so – knowing that I'll get to taste hers – I decide to choose something else: ‘I take that back, I'll have the posset, please!’, I say to the waiter. Similarly, adapting an example of Ramsey's (Ramsey 1929, 137), imagine that you say to a friend, ‘I'll be going to Grantchester this afternoon.’ By lunchtime your plans have changed, so you take it back: ‘I take that back, I won't be going to Grantchester this afternoon after all.’

6. MacFarlane on disagreement

Let's now turn to disagreement, in both the senses I mentioned at the beginning – mine with MR, and the differences between our accounts about disagreement itself. Again, let's follow MacFarlane's own exposition, beginning with some remarks from (MacFarlane 2007):

One might ... despair of ever getting subjectivity and disagreement into the same picture. Perhaps we just have to choose. This is where the relativist comes in with her seductive song. "You can have it both ways," she says, "if you just accept that propositions about the funny, the delicious, and the likely have truth values only relative to a person or perspective. When I say that apples are delicious and you deny this, you are denying the very same proposition that I am asserting. We genuinely disagree. Yet this proposition may be true for you and false for me. That is what the 'subjectivity' of these claims comes to: perspectival dependence of their truth on features of the subjects who assess them. (2007, 21)

The question I want to address is whether this helps with the problem of lost disagreement. How can there be disagreement between Abe and Ben, on the relativist's view, if the proposition Abe asserts and Ben denies is true relative to Abe's standard of taste and false relative to Ben's? Aren't they just talking past each other, in some sense? What, exactly, does "disagreement" amount to in a relativist semantic framework? This is a key question for the relativist, because the advantage of relativism over contextualism is supposed to be precisely that the relativist secures the possibility of genuine disagreement about matters subjective. (2007, 22)

MacFarlane explores these questions at much greater length in his book (MacFarlane 2014). Let's pick up the account there:

Disagreement is the crux of debates between relativists, objectivists, and contextualists. Objectivism accounts for the disagreement we feel in disputes of taste, at the cost of imputing implausible kinds of error and chauvinism to speakers; contextualism avoids chauvinism at the cost of losing the disagreement. Relativism, it is alleged, does better than objectivism because it avoids imputing error and chauvinism, and better than contextualism because it vindicates our intuitions of disagreement. (2014, 136)

MacFarlane emphasises that 'vindicat[ing] our intuitions of disagreement' does not mean recognising no difference whatsoever between disagreement in the cases such as 'tasty' and in cases involving, as he puts it 'paradigm matters of objective fact'. On the contrary:

[T]he relativist can use disagreement as the crux of an argument against the contextualist, while still conceding to the objectivist that there are ways in which the kind of disagreement vindicated by the relativist account falls short of the kind of disagreement one finds about paradigm matters of objective fact. Indeed, the relativist can claim to have found a comfortable middle ground between the objectivist position, which

attributes to disputes of taste more robust disagreement than there actually is, and the contextualist position, which does not find enough disagreement. (137)

As he says, this strategy involves

identify[ing] several varieties of disagreement. We can then ask, about each dialogue of interest, which of these kinds of disagreement can be found in it, and we can adjudicate between candidate theories of meaning by asking which theories predict the kinds of disagreement we find. (119)

In my discussion below, I want to focus on the question whether MR captures enough of the disagreement we find in cases such as ‘tasty’. MacFarlane argues, and I agree, that contextualism *loses* disagreement. Does relativism really find it again? In thinking about this question, the difference between relativism and objectivism is crucial. For now, let’s assume that we agree with MacFarlane that objectivism *doesn’t* lose disagreement. Later, this will be another point of disagreement between ME and MR – in my view, as I’ll explain, MacFarlane takes too much for granted with respect to the cases he regards as non-relativistic.

We won’t need the full details of MacFarlane’s taxonomy of varieties of disagreement for the points I want to make here. In the next two subsections I’ll present some of the key ideas and terminology, with a few comments from my side, but even this level of detail could safely be skipped on a first reading. We’ll pick up the bigger picture again in §6.3.

6.1 *Joint accuracy and the difference between relativism and objectivism*

MacFarlane’s discussion of the difference between relativism and objectivism concerning disagreement involves a neologism he introduces, that of *accuracy*. In the imagined example here, MacFarlane himself is not eating a sandwich today, but someone else, David, was eating one yesterday.

An attitude or speech act has a content, and this content can be properly said to be true or false. But the same content can be true relative to one circumstance of evaluation and false relative to another. To say that the attitude or speech act is accurate is, roughly, to say that it is true relative to the circumstance that matters. In the case of attitudes with centered contents, this is usually taken to be the world, time, and agent of the context. So although I now take the content believed by David yesterday—the centered proposition *I am eating a sandwich*—to be false, I take David’s belief yesterday to have been accurate, since its content is true at the triple ⟨actual world, yesterday, David⟩. In this case, to say that a belief or assertion is accurate is to say that its content is true relative to its context. More generally, allowing for assessment sensitivity:

Accuracy. *An attitude or speech act occurring at c_1 is accurate, as assessed from a context c_2 , just in case its content is true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 .*

The distinction between truth and accuracy doesn’t matter much when we’re considering whether to assert or believe something ourselves. For in that case it will be correct to

judge the assertion or belief accurate just in case it is correct to judge its content true (in the monadic sense [see below]). But the distinction matters a great deal when we are considering the speech acts and attitudes of others, or our own earlier speech acts and attitudes. A past assertion need not be retracted if it was accurate, even if its content is one we now take to be false. Conversely, it ought to be retracted if it was inaccurate, even if its content is one we now take to be true. (2014, 126–127)

By the ‘monadic sense’ of ‘true’, MacFarlane means

the ordinary truth predicate used in everyday talk—a *monadic* predicate that applies to propositions, and is governed by the

Equivalence Schema. *The proposition that Φ is true iff Φ .*

The relativist ... can treat the monadic predicate “true” as just another predicate of the object language—the language for which she is giving a semantics. (2014, 93)

Thus *accuracy*, in MacFarlane’s sense, is a proprietary notion of correctness, introduced to provide sensitivity to context of assessment of a kind lacked by the ordinary notion of truth.⁶ MacFarlane uses this notion to characterise the objectivist’s and relativist’s disagreement about disagreement:

Both the relativist and the objectivist ... will say that disagreements about what is tasty involve preclusion of joint accuracy. At least this is so if by “preclusion of joint accuracy” we mean

Preclusion of joint accuracy. *The accuracy of my attitudes (as assessed from any context) precludes the accuracy of your attitude or speech act (as assessed from that same context).*

However, there is another way in which we might generalize the notion of preclusion of joint accuracy, which distinguishes the relativist from the objectivist:

Preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy. *The accuracy of my attitudes (as assessed from my context) precludes the accuracy of your attitude or speech act (as assessed from your context).*

On a relativist account, when two people have incompatible beliefs about whether something is tasty, joint accuracy is precluded, but joint reflexive accuracy is not. Yum’s belief may be accurate as assessed from her context, while Yuk’s is accurate as assessed from his. For the relativist, then, preclusion of joint accuracy and preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy come apart. For the objectivist, by contrast, they coincide, because

⁶ As MacFarlane (2007, 23, n. 7) notes, an ‘alternative would be to talk of the truth of propositions relative to *contexts*’, as he does in MacFarlane (2005).

accuracy is absolute. A belief is accurate as assessed from one believer's context just in case it is accurate as assessed from the other's.

The relativist, then, need not claim to be vindicating disagreement in all the same senses as the objectivist is. She can acknowledge that, in some respects, disagreement about taste is less robust than paradigm objective disagreements, which do preclude joint reflexive accuracy. (2014, 129–130)

6.2 MacFarlane on disputes of taste

With the above terminology in place, MacFarlane turns to his account of disagreement in disputes of taste.

Enough distinguishing! Recall our strategy. Instead of posing the problem in a binary way—is there “real disagreement” between Yum and Yuk, and if so, can the relativist account capture it?—the idea was to ask which of the varieties of disagreement we have distinguished are present in the dispute between Yum and Yuk, and which semantic theories allow for these. So, let's go to it.

We certainly have practical noncotenability. Yuk has an attitude towards licorice that Yum cannot coherently take on board herself without changing her own attitudes towards licorice. Even if Yum does not disagree with anything Yuk *believes*, then, there may be a reason for them to argue. Yum may want to change Yuk's attitude about licorice, making it congruent with her own, and to do this she may try to call Yuk's attention to various salient facts about the licorice. These facts will play a role much like that of premises in an argument, except that their intended effect is not a change of belief but a change in taste. (2014, 130)

Here, to keep things in perspective, I want to note that we also get this in expression of intention cases, like those I mentioned earlier. Practical noncotenability is clear – since only one dessert is allowed, I can't order both the posset and the panna cotta. More importantly, I may want to *change* my wife's dessert order, to make it congruent (or non congruent, as in my example above) with my own. To do this I may try to call my wife's attention to various salient facts about panna cotta and/or posset. “These facts will play a role much like that of premises in an argument, except that their intended effect is not a change of belief but a change in' expressed intention.

However, MacFarlane notes that while various views can account for practical noncotenability, disputes about matters of taste seem to require something stronger.

[S]ome of the ways in which Yuk might naturally express his disagreement with Yum seem to require something beyond practical noncotenability. First, there's the word “No” in “No, it's not tasty at all.” “No” would be quite infelicitous, I think, with explicit self-avowals of attitude:

- (6) Yum: I like this.
Yuk: No, I don't like it.

Second, Yuk could naturally express his disagreement using devices of propositional anaphora:

- (7) I don't believe that!
What you're saying is false!
I can't accept that.

This is hard to explain unless Yuk takes himself to disagree with what Yum has asserted, or with a belief Yum thereby expresses. It seems to require not just practical but doxastic noncotenability. And it is hard to see how standard contextualist or expressivist accounts are going to get that. (2014, 131)

However, he notes that contextualists can make sense of this data, too, by means of what he calls 'a nonindexical version of contextualism' (2014, 131).

On such a view, there is a single proposition, the proposition that licorice is tasty, which Yum believes and Yuk disbelieves, but whether this proposition is true at a context of use depends on the tastes of the agent of the context. This approach would retain the key contextualist idea that the accuracy of Yuk's belief about the tastiness of licorice depends on Yuk's tastes, while the accuracy of Yum's belief depends on Yum's tastes. ... Even though Yuk could acknowledge that Yum's belief is accurate, he could not regard its content as true, and he could not come to believe what Yum believes without giving up a belief of his own. This would be enough to vindicate responses like those in (7). (2014, 132)

However, MacFarlane argues that making sense of retraction is a tie-breaker between relativism and contextualism:

[T]hings tip in favor of relativism if the parties to such disagreements think of themselves not just as trying to change the other party's attitudes, but as trying to *refute* them—where the sign of successful refutation is not just that the other party now holds the content of her original claim to be false, but that she retracts her original assertion as inaccurate.

Disputes of taste do seem to have this flavor. If Yuk eventually gets Yum to dislike the taste of licorice, Yum will feel pressure to withdraw her earlier assertion that it is tasty. In this respect, disputes of taste are like disputes about any objective matter—for example, the age of the earth. (2014, 132)

The contextualist, by contrast, should predict no pressure to retract. Without a role for context of assessment, Yum's previous assertion is perfectly in order by all relevant standards, and doesn't need to be withdrawn.

Again, I note that my expression of intention cases go on the same side as relativism. If I change my mind about what dessert to order, I have to retract my earlier order, as well as making a new one.

MacFarlane then returns to the difference between relativism and objectivism:

In another respect, though, [disputes about matters of taste] are not much like disputes about paradigm objective matters. For Yuk can only compel Yum to retract her assertion by, so to speak, changing Yum's perspective—bringing it about that Yum occupies a context of assessment that differs in semantically relevant ways from the one she occupied before. For, as long as Yum persists in her liking for licorice, the relativist account predicts, she is warranted in standing by her original assertion (even if it is inaccurate from Yuk's perspective). As long as what she asserted remains true as assessed from her current context, she need not retract. In cases of maximally robust disagreement, by contrast, retraction can be compelled (when it can be compelled at all) without any change of perspective. The very same facts that show a claim to be false as assessed from one perspective will suffice to show it false as assessed from any other.

By distinguishing between preclusion of joint accuracy and preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy, we can mark this difference. I think that in disputes of taste we can find the former but not the latter. (2014, 133)

6.3 *The phenomenology of disagreement*

Back now to the bigger picture. Here is a helpful passage from (MacFarlane 2007), giving his sense of what disagreement looks like in relativistic cases.

This [relativist] account captures the distinctive phenomenology of disagreement about matters whose truth is relative. The challenger thinks (rightly) that he has absolutely compelling grounds for thinking that the assertion [e.g., again, 'Licorice is tasty'] was not accurate. But the original asserter thinks (also rightly, from her point of view) that the challenger's grounds do nothing to call in question the accuracy of the assertion. The asserter's vindication will seem to the challenger not to show that the assertion was accurate, and the challenger will continue to press his claim. (Until the game gets boring.) Thus we have all the normative trappings of real disagreement, but without the possibility of resolution except by a relevant change in one or both parties' contexts of assessment. (2007, 29)

Is MacFarlane right that MR 'captures the distinctive phenomenology of disagreement' about matters of taste, and that it offers us 'all the normative trappings of real disagreement'? In my view, no, on both points.⁷ On the contrary, I think it makes a mystery of the phenomenology of disagreement, because it does such a poor job of making sense of the normative trappings. Why, given relativism, should I, or a fellow speaker, *care* that I think I have compelling grounds for thinking that their assertion is inaccurate? Why should that ruffle either party's feathers in the slightest, so long as we understand that it is a relativist case? As MacFarlane himself puts it earlier in the same piece:

⁷To be clear, I am happy to allow that what MacFarlane describes here is, indeed, 'the distinctive phenomenology of disagreement *about matters whose truth is relative*', in his sense. What I deny is that such cases 'have all the normative trappings of real disagreement'.

How can there be disagreement between Abe and Ben, on the relativist's view, if the proposition Abe asserts and Ben denies is true relative to Abe's standard of taste and false relative to Ben's? Aren't they just talking past each other, in some sense? (2007, 21)

It is true, as MacFarlane notes, that the need or desire for coordination may provide a reason to care about the disagreement; but such a reason is not there by default. We see this easily in the expression of intention cases, which I have been comparing with judgements of taste as MacFarlane understands them. To vary that case slightly, imagine that the waiter approaches the table, and says, 'Would anyone care for coffee?' We can imagine an alternating sequence of responses from two diners: 'Yes, please'; 'No, thank you'; 'As I said, *yes!*'; 'And as I said, *no!*'; ... This becomes boring, too, and for the same reason. There is nothing more than a trick of the language to make the two diners think there is any issue between them.⁸

The trick of the language may be more convincing in the tasty case, because the labels 'true' and 'false' (or 'accurate' and 'inaccurate') are permitted, and the two parties apply them differently. This would indeed explain the phenomenology of disagreement, under the supposition that Yum and Yuk don't realise that the case is subject to context-relative standards of accuracy. But this is no help to MacFarlane, who wants to get the phenomenology right *for folk like him*, who do know the story. (He wants the relativist's account of truth and accuracy to *explain* the phenomenology, presumably.) Whereas it seems to me that we only 'get the normative trappings' if we can *ignore* what we know about the perspectival character of the accuracy conditions – if we pretend (or mistakenly believe) that there is an objective matter at issue, as it were.

However, I am aware that at this point my objection to MacFarlane here leans on my intuitions about the 'real' phenomenology of disputes about cases such as matters of taste, intuitions that he simply doesn't share. So rather than press a disagreement that may itself be in danger of becoming boring – particularly since my alternative treatment of these cases is not yet on the table for comparison – let me steer things in a different direction. MacFarlane seems to be assuming that explaining the phenomenology of disagreement is straightforward in non-relative cases. I disagree, and I think that this point turns out to be the major divergence between ME and MR. Let's now move in that direction – though not before we encounter some further congruence between MacFarlane's motivations and mine.

To lead us to this further congruence, here is MacFarlane's suggestion about why the subjective cases might work the way he takes them to work:

Assessment-sensitive expressions are designed, it seems, to foster controversy, where use-sensitive expressions preclude it. But what is the point of fostering controversy in "subjective" domains, if there is no (nonrelative) truth on which both parties can

⁸ Here is a real example, illustrating that this sort of linguistic trick can briefly confuse an intelligent four year old: "I love you, Mummy"; "No, I love YOU, Ruben"; "No, I love YOU!"; "No, I LOVE YOU!"; "Mummy, how about we love each other?"; "Perfect!" (Rozea, Marnie and Rozea, Ruben, 2021).

converge? Why shouldn't we just talk about our own tastes, rather than ascribing subjective properties to the objects?

Perhaps the point is to bring about agreement by leading our interlocutors into relevantly different contexts of assessment. If you say "skiing is fun" and I contradict you, it is not because I think that the proposition you asserted is false as assessed by you in your current situation, with the affective attitudes you now have, but because I hope to change these attitudes. Perhaps, then, the point of using controversy inducing assessment-sensitive vocabulary is to foster *coordination* of contexts. We have an interest in sharing standards of taste, senses of humor, and epistemic states with those around us. The reasons are different in each case. In the case of humor, we want people to appreciate our jokes, and we want them to tell jokes we appreciate. In the case of epistemic states, it is manifestly in our interest to share a picture of the world, and to learn from others when they know things that we do not.

Controversy encourages coordination because, in general, controversy is uncomfortable. But why should controversy feel uncomfortable even when the disagreement is entirely due to differences in the interlocutors' respective contexts of assessment? One possible answer is: it just is. That's a brute psychological fact about us. Perhaps, as Allan Gibbard suggests (Gibbard, 1990, p. 217), there is an evolutionary explanation. Assessment-sensitive expressions exploit this psychological fact about us—our tendency to treat dispute as a crisis to be resolved—to foster subjective coordination by provoking controversy. From lofty philosophical heights, the language games we play with words like 'funny' and 'likely' may seem irrational. But that is no reason to deny that we do play these games, or that they have a social purpose. If describing our use of these expressions requires relativizing the accuracy of speech acts and mental states to contexts of assessment, then this much relativism is required by our dispensation to describe the world as it is, not as we think it ought to be. That is surely a motivation that even the staunchest antirealist can embrace. (2007, 30)

As I have said, I think that on MacFarlane's view, his assessment-sensitive vocabulary should not actually be 'controversy inducing'. He doesn't satisfactorily meet his own challenge, namely, that 'on the relativist's view' speakers in different contexts are 'just talking past each other, in some sense.' Aside from the use of the labels 'true' and 'false', there's nothing more controversy-inducing in the relativist picture than there is for the kind of expressions of intention with which I have compared it. And MacFarlane hasn't explained why these labels should induce controversy in these cases (or indeed, as I am going to argue below, why they should do so *in general*).

Those points aside, there's much to like in these remarks, from my point of view. As we'll see, the idea that assertoric language is a coordination device is central to my approach to truth.⁹ But I apply it quite generally, without MacFarlane's distinction between relative and absolute cases. Indeed, I think that MacFarlane's 'lofty philosophical heights' are not lofty enough, in that they

⁹ Shapiro (2014, 160) notes the similarities between these proposals in (MacFarlane 2007) and my views in FFT and elsewhere.

don't step back far enough to ask the general question. Stepping back further enables me to tell a similar story, but one in which the application to cases like *tasty* differs only by degree from what MacFarlane thinks of as the core absolute cases. At a first pass, we could describe this as the fiction that there is objective matter at stake, but with the crucial rider that it in the same sense, it is fiction all the way down – which means, as we'll see, that 'fiction' is a label we can kick away.

7. Standing on Dummett's shoulders

In a moment I'll describe my own approach to these ideas about coordination. I'll explain how it differs from MacFarlane's, and why I think it offers a better explanation of the linguistic data. But by way of transition, let me first note some further similarities between MacFarlane's approach and mine.

In particular, we both appeal to Dummett's classic discussion of truth (Dummett 1959). MacFarlane (2014, 99–100) cites with approval Dummett's remark that 'what has to be added to a truth-definition for the sentences of a language, if the notion of truth is to be explained, is a description of the linguistic activity of making assertions.' (Dummett 1959, 20) MacFarlane also recommends Dummett's proposal that as a first step towards such an account of assertion, we begin with the idea, as MacFarlane puts it, 'that assertoric utterances are governed by the convention that one should intend to utter only true sentences.' (MacFarlane 2014, 100) Two points that MacFarlane makes in this context seem particularly congenial, from my point of view:

First, Dummett has given an example of an explication of "true" that does not take the form of a definition. Instead of defining "true," Dummett proposes to illuminate it by describing its role in a broader theory of language use—in particular, its connection to the speech act of assertion. ...

Second, if Dummett is right, then it is not just the relativist who owes an explication of the significance of her truth predicate. The absolutist owes one as well—at least if she is to use this predicate in semantics. ... It may be that the task is easier to discharge for the non-relativist, but the task is the same for both sides. (2014, 100)

The starkest difference between ME and MR stems from the fact that by my lights, MacFarlane doesn't push the second of these points far enough. As a result, MR leaves something mysterious about the normative character of ordinary, 'objective' disputes – something that we can bring into focus by thinking about what is missing in MacFarlane's treatment of the subjective cases. To explain what I mean by this, it will be helpful to dig deeply into the origins of my own view, to find the points at which my motivations aligned most closely with MacFarlane's.

8. Early ME

I noted above that MacFarlane cites an early paper of mine (Price 1983a), in which I defend an expressivist account of probability. Dummett's work was a major influence on me at that point, prominent in two other papers from the same year (Price 1983b, 1983c), as well in my Cambridge PhD thesis a couple of years earlier (Price 1981), from which (Price 1983a) derives. By describing the use I made of Dummett's work on truth, I can explain why the remarks I just

quoted from MacFarlane (2007) seem so congenial, as well as the respects in which I take similar thoughts in a different direction.

One of my Dummett-influenced papers from that period is a piece called ‘Could a Question be True?: Assent and the Basis of Meaning’ (Price 1983c). This piece stemmed from my interests in disagreement and in the sense/force distinction, and in the connections between the two. By this point, my concern with what I saw as ‘non-standard’ ascriptions of truth and falsity – e.g., ascriptions to probability judgements, which (Price 1983a) argues are not genuinely truth-conditional – had led me to Dummett’s question: Why do we call each other’s utterances ‘true’ and ‘false’ in the first place? What is the *point of doing so*, as Dummett puts it?

At one time it was usual to say that we do not call ethical statements ‘true’ or ‘false’, and from this many consequences for ethics were held to flow. But the question is not whether these words are in practice applied to ethical statements, but whether, if they were so applied, the point of doing so would be the same as the point of applying them to statements of other kinds, and, if not, in what ways it would be different. (Dummett 1959, 3)

In (Price 1983c) I proposed an answer to this question about the ‘point’ of truth. It was the beginnings of an account of the role of truth and falsity that was to play a central role in FFT, and in later work, such as (Price 1998, 2003). But it is the early paper which ties the proposal most directly to Dummett.

I begin by asking ‘why it is not appropriate to assent to or dissent from utterances such as questions, commands and requests’ (1983c, 355). I note that ‘[o]ne function of the terms “true” and “false” is to provide a uniform means of endorsing or rejecting a statement made by a previous speaker’, and that this is in effect Strawson’s (1949) account. ‘However’, I say,

if this were all that ‘true’ and ‘false’ did, it would be unclear why they shouldn’t be applied to utterances other than assertions – to questions, for example. There are many circumstances in which it would be useful to have a simple device for putting one’s weight behind a question asked by someone else; for indicating, in effect, that one is asking the same question oneself. Similarly, there are situations in which it would be useful to be able to indicate in a simple way that a question did not have one’s endorsement. ... If a major function of the terms ‘true’ and ‘false’ is to provide a simple means of so endorsing or rejecting a previous utterance, why should these terms be applied only to assertions, and not to utterances of other force-types?¹⁰ (1983c, 355)

I note that another possible answer is ‘that questions (commands, requests, etc.) don’t have truth-conditions, and are therefore not properly described as true or false’ (1983c, 355). But I argue that this looks ‘suspiciously circular’, especially if ‘holding true’ and ‘holding false’ are supposed to provide the evidential basis for a theory of meaning, as in the Davidsonian framework I had in the background. I suggest that a more promising approach

¹⁰ As I say in (Price 1987) and in FFT, Bernard Williams (1966) had made this point about Strawson’s account.

lies in the claim that, as Dummett puts it, ‘the roots of the notions of truth and falsity lie in the distinction between a speaker’s being, objectively, *right* or *wrong* in what he says when he makes an assertion’ (1978, p. *xvii*). That is, to call an utterance ‘true’ is to say that it (or its speaker) is *correct*, or *right*; to call it ‘false’, to say that it (or the speaker) is *incorrect*, or *wrong*. (1983c, 355)

However, I say, ‘[t]his is a step in the right direction but not a solution’:

For it has not been explained how to call an utterance ‘correct’ is to do more than simply endorse it (in the sense seen to be equally appropriate for questions); and to call it ‘incorrect’, to do more than to reject or decline to endorse it. It is no use appealing to further ways of saying that an utterance is incorrect, or wrong (that it is ‘at fault’, say, or ‘mistaken’). Rather we need an account of the function of this collection of descriptions, and some understanding of their consequences in typical conversations. (1983c, 355–356)

In effect, then, I was suggesting that Dummett does not push his own question about truth far enough. We need to ask about the point of having some such norm in the first place. I then offer my own proposal, which, in four paragraphs, is the core of the ‘dialectical’ account of the functions of the norms of truth and falsity that I was to develop in FFT.

It seems to me that the primary significance of these forms of criticism lies in the fact that they constitute a challenge to a speaker to *justify* an utterance, and an indication of readiness on the part of the critic to engage in a *dispute*. In such a dispute, rival, incompatible views are exposed to common scrutiny. Ideally the more well-justified prevails, and one speaker recants, accepting the view of the other. Plausibly, there is enough of a general advantage in such dispute behaviour to explain the existence of a powerful linguistic device to facilitate it (i.e., the use of ‘true’ and ‘false’). This advantage will be explained in terms of the behavioural consequences of particular views, and the consequent benefits of basing one’s views on as wide a body of experience as possible.

For the deliberately vague term ‘views’ here, it is natural to read ‘beliefs’. There would seem too little point in such a “dispute” with respect to utterances expressing, say, desires, which could reasonably vary from speaker to speaker, even in the face of the same evidence as to matters of fact. In other words, the suggestion is this: some utterances (call them ‘assertions’) characteristically express states of mind (‘beliefs’) with respect to which there is reason to seek agreement between speakers. For these states of mind, “two heads are better than one”; there is a general advantage in exhibiting differences between speakers in this respect, so that less well-justified beliefs may be replaced by more well-justified ones. This explains why language has developed a general means of indicating such agreements and disagreements, in the application of the terms ‘true’ and ‘false’ to the associated utterances.

Utterances such as questions, commands and requests, on the other hand, characteristically result from states of mind for which no such reason for unanimity exists. Different speakers can reasonably hold conflicting such states of mind (conflicting in the sense that no one person could hold them concurrently), even if fully acquainted with each other's viewpoint. Appropriately, ordinary usage does not apply 'true' and 'false' to the types of utterance which express, or result from, these states of mind.

The claim is thus that there would be a certain value in a general device for merely, in effect, repeating or declining to repeat a previous utterance; this value would lie in brevity and convenience. But the process thereby facilitated would be one of less significance than that which forms a part of a dispute procedure, whereby conflicting beliefs are brought under common scrutiny, to the general advantage of the speakers concerned. So the facilitating of this latter process is the more important task of the terms 'true' and 'false', and therefore the one which takes priority, in determining their extension to utterances of a particular kind. (1983c, 356–357)

Let me pause to compare this proposal to the one that MacFarlane (2007) offers, where he asks about the point of disagreement in cases like 'tasty'.

Assessment-sensitive expressions are designed, it seems, to foster controversy, where use-sensitive expressions preclude it. But what is the point of fostering controversy in "subjective" domains, if there is no (nonrelative) truth on which both parties can converge? Why shouldn't we just talk about our own tastes, rather than ascribing subjective properties to the objects? (2007, 30)

In effect, I am asking the same question about the point of 'fostering controversy', but as a question about assertoric language in general, rather than about a special case. In case it is unclear how the answer can be anything but obvious in the general case, I note two things.

First, it is easy to find ways of *cancelling* controversy, for any sort of assertion whatsoever. We do this all the time, when we want to reduce the temperature of a disagreement. Instead of simply saying 'P', I say 'Well, my own view on this is that P'. It is worth asking why this isn't the default. In other words, why doesn't saying 'P' have this more gentle, controversy-reducing feel from the start? (More on this thought below.)

Second, any seemingly obvious answer in the general case is likely to appeal to our intuitions about truth and falsity, e.g., by pointing out that where two speakers disagree about a non-subjective case, one of them believes something *false*. But that won't do if our interest is in getting at the 'point' of truth and falsity themselves, in Dummett's sense.

After introducing the proposal above, (Price 1983c) goes on to discuss some different ways in which two speakers can disagree, based on differences of evidence and other things. It defends a criterion for being a *genuine* assertion, or a *genuinely* truth-conditional claim, on which I had relied in (Price 1983a), the paper that MacFarlane cites. In the language I was to use later in FFT, the test is a matter of not permitting no fault disagreements (NFDs). At this point, then, I was

defending a line that looks very much like (an admittedly crude version of) the one proposed by MacFarlane.¹¹

A few years later, however, I had come to doubt whether the NFD criterion could mark a sharp line. One crucial influence was exposure to the so-called rule following considerations, in Kripke's (1982) book, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. I had had the opportunity to discuss this book at ANU in 1983, in a reading group with Philip Pettit, Peter Menzies, and others. I eventually became convinced that the ineliminable possibility that different speakers might diverge from one another, in virtue of possessing different dispositions to 'go on in the same way', was a *universal* potential source of NFDs. If so, NFDs couldn't possibly mark a boundary between genuinely truth-conditional uses of declarative language and all the rest (except in the trivial sense in which there is a boundary between a null class and everything else).

Thus, my reliance on NFDs as a mark of the kind of non-factuality I had wanted to attribute to probabilistic claims, had pushed me to the conclusion that *no* uses of assertoric language were fully factual, in the assumed sense. And this seemed to me an appealing option to have on the table, not least in Kripke's own case. I felt that the assessment of Kripke's 'sceptical solution', by Kripke himself amongst others, was insufficiently sensitive to the broader implications of the arguments. To put it crudely, it was less shocking that there were no genuine facts about meaning, if one had in any case had to renounce the conception of genuinely factual language, against which the contrast was supposedly being drawn.¹²

By the time I wrote FFT, I had thus become sceptical of an assumption on which I had relied in (Price 1983a) and (Price 1983c), and which was – and still is – very widely taken for granted. This assumption is the Bifurcation Thesis – the view that there is a division *within* the class of indicative utterances between genuinely factual claims, on one side, and utterances with some other role or status, on the other.¹³ I had become convinced of the attractions of a kind of *global* 'non-factualism', a view that treated the familiar non-cognitivism about ethics and probability as some of the tips of an all-encompassing iceberg.¹⁴ And I had come to this position, in part, by thinking about the role of responses such as 'That's true' or 'That's false' in dialogue – both in

¹¹ MacFarlane (2014, 133–136) makes some well-taken criticisms of Max Köbel's (2004) notion of 'faultless disagreement', and Shapiro (2014) notes some infelicities in my use of 'no fault disagreement'. I won't try to sort out those issues here, but instead stick to my old terminology in the interests of consistency and brevity.

¹² Thus kicking away the fictionalist label, again.

¹³ Shapiro (2021b) points out that the Bifurcation Thesis – terminology I borrow from Kraut (1990), who says he takes it from Rorty – is already clearly identified by (Toulmin and Baier, 1952), who call it 'the Great Divide'. Shapiro notes that Toulmin and Baker are critical of the thesis, taking it to result 'from conflating several cross-cutting distinctions drawn in ordinary language using terms such as "describe", "statement", and "act"' (Shapiro 2021b, §2); Shapiro draws parallels with my criticisms of the use of the Bifurcation Thesis by 'local' expressivists such as Blackburn and Gibbard.

Even if not explicitly named, similar distinctions are certainly in play earlier – e.g., Carnap's distinction between statements and pseudo-statements. Strawson (1950, 142–143) refers to 'the fact-stating type of discourse'. He asks 'why should the problem of Truth ... be seen as this problem of elucidating the fact-stating type of discourse?'; his 'answer is that it shouldn't be ... The problem about the use of "true" is to see how this word fits into [the fact-stating] frame of discourse. The surest route to the wrong answer is to confuse this problem with the question: What type of discourse is this?' In this respect, as we'll see, my views are with Strawson, against MacFarlane.

¹⁴ By the lights of FFT I think this could equally be a global relativism, if one preferred MR's way of explaining the raw data.

general, and in what I had previously seen as special cases, such as probability judgements. Together, these conclusions correspond to the main themes of FFT: rejection of the Bifurcation Thesis and of the notion of strict or genuine factuality on which it depends; a defence of a kind of global non-factualism; and an account of truth and falsity, and their limits, in terms of norms of agreement and disagreement.

9. Truth as convenient friction

In the years after FFT, I developed this dialectical approach to truth in two main papers. The first of them, ‘Three norms of assertibility, or how the MOA became extinct’ (Price 1998), distinguishes the conversational norm I take to be associated with truth and falsity from two other norms, those of *sincerity* and *warranted assertibility*. Truth is thus my ‘third norm’, and the focus of the paper is on what this third norm adds to our conversational practice – on the question *how things would be different if we didn’t have it*.

As an aid to answering this question, I imagine a speech community who don’t have the third norm, but who nevertheless use speech acts to give voice to their opinions. I call such speech acts ‘merely opinionated assertions’, or MOAs, and imagine them used by a community called Mo’ans. As I point out (and noted above), it is easy to get to something like MOAs in our own linguistic practices, by using devices to cancel the third norm: ‘My own opinion is that P’; ‘Mine is that not-P.’¹⁵

It is striking how similar the stance of this paper is to the one that MacFarlane adopts, in the passage I quoted above from (MacFarlane 2007) – as he himself calls it elsewhere, an *engineering* stance (see, e.g., MacFarlane 2014, 310). The difference, of course, is that I am asking the engineering question about the truth norm in general, not about a supposed special case for ‘subjective’ assertions. I’m getting there by imagining the Mo’ans, for whom all assertion is in a sense subjective – what they lack, according to me, is the sense of objectivity that comes with the third norm. But this seems very much in the spirit of one of the points that we saw that MacFarlane takes from Dummett:

[I]f Dummett is right, then it is not just the relativist who owes an explication of the significance of her truth predicate. The absolutist owes one as well ... It may be that the task is easier to discharge for the non-relativist, but the task is the same for both sides. (MacFarlane 2014, 100)

I cover similar ground in ‘Truth as convenient friction’ (Price 2003). Invoking the MOA again, I argue that ‘some of the basic functions of assertoric discourse could be fulfilled in an analogous way, by a practice which lacked the third norm’.

¹⁵ To forestall a likely objection, I emphasise that the use I make of MOAs does not depend on the claim that an entire speech community could *actually* work this way. As I note, it may well be that the third norm is essential to anything that could count as assertoric language. But if so, that’s a point in my favour: the MOAs are a kind of thought experiment, intended to call attention to something so familiar that it is difficult to bring into focus. (For discussion of this point, see Price and Rorty 2010.)

But it will be clear, I hope, that that practice would not support dialogue as we know it. What is missing – what the third norm provides – is the automatic and quite unconscious sense of engagement in common purpose that distinguishes assertoric dialogue from a mere roll call of individual opinion. Truth is the grit that makes our individual opinions engage with one another. Truth puts the cogs in cognition, at least in its public manifestations. (Price 2003, 169)

Again, let me note the similarity between this view and the one that MacFarlane (2007) suggests for the special cases. What MacFarlane misses, in my view, is the need for analogous explanation in the so-called objective or absolute cases.

To be fair, MacFarlane is in excellent company. This deeper issue about disagreement is on almost nobody's radar. In a later review article (Price 2006), I make a similar point against Blackburn's version of minimalism about truth, and use a different analogy to highlight the question posed by the Mo'ans. Because the issue is crucial to my disagreement with MacFarlane, and the point I am making is so easy to miss, I'll quote at length from this piece.

I'm going to distinguish two conversational games, in one of which—not the one we actually play—there is no norm of the relevant sort [i.e., the third norm, the one that the Mo'ans lack]. But I want to begin with a simpler case, involving an analogous distinction between two kinds of examination. The first kind is familiar from popular 'know thyself' questionnaires, the point of which is simply to reveal the examinee's own state of mind, in relevant respects. Thus if I'm the examinee, and the first question is 'Was Aristotle a Belgian?', I should answer 'Yes' if I believe that Aristotle was Belgian and 'No' if I believe he was not. The crucial point is that there is no 'objective' standard that I need to meet: as long as my answers accurately reflect my own beliefs, I won't lose any marks. Call this the *autological* examination, or auto-exam, for short.

Now contrast this auto-exam to the kind of examination still familiar in most schools and universities. In this case, someone who answers 'Yes' to the question 'Was Aristotle a Belgian?' loses a mark—gets the question *wrong*, as we'd say—because, as we'd put it, 'Aristotle wasn't a Belgian'. One can imagine a candidate, perhaps even a misguided institution, objecting to this kind of examination on the grounds that it casts the examiners in the role of gods, trying to assess a student's answer from an ideal Archimedean standpoint. Rid ourselves of quasi-religious metaphysics, and isn't it just our word against theirs, examiners versus examinees? We think that Aristotle was Greek, the candidate thinks he was Belgian, but there's no divine umpire to settle the matter. Doesn't this mean that there's something suspect about this sort of examination?

If this is a practical question, the answer is certainly 'No'. After all, the system has been working quite nicely for centuries, despite the fact that its examiners have never been gods. What we examiners actually do isn't to assess our students from a god-like Archimedean viewpoint, but simply from our own viewpoint: roughly, we mark them wrong when their answers are not the ones that we would give ourselves. In a practical sense, then, this kind of examination—*heterological* examination, as we might call it—doesn't require an absolute standpoint after all. It requires the standpoint of *others*, not the standpoint of *gods*.

But it may require a kind of pretense of such an Archimedean standpoint. Perhaps it works more effectively if both sides see the students as aiming for an objective standard of which the examiners are good but not infallible judges, than if correctness is simply seen as a matter of agreeing with the examiners.¹⁶ If so, then perhaps the notion of correctness at the core of the practice is a kind of useful myth. We might concede this but still want to keep the practice going, apparently. We might think that we produce better engineers, doctors and philosophers if we put trainees through this ordeal than if we don't, for example. (Perhaps the myth is generally conducive to success in these endeavours, as it were, even though the relevant notion of correctness cannot be identified case-by-case with successfulness ...)

For the moment, I want to stress two things about this case. The first is that we can 'fake' the objective, Archimedean examination, by applying the relevant norm from our own standpoint—the result is still very different from an auto-exam. The second is that we can add the purely transparent kind of truth-predicate throughout, *in either kind of exam*, without making any difference. We can imagine an auto-exam in which I have to write down 'It is true that Aristotle was a Belgian' or 'It is false that Aristotle was a Belgian', for example. If it is an auto-exam at one end of Ramsey's horizontal ladder, it remains an auto-exam at the other. Ramsey's thin kind of truth is simply insensitive to the distinction between the two kinds of examination—which means that if we want to explain the difference, we need to look somewhere else. ...

We can draw a parallel distinction between two kinds of assertion, or conversation. In one kind ('autological conversation'), the aim is simply to give voice to what one actually believes, as accurately as possible. In the other kind ('heterological conversation'), the aim is as if one's assertions were answers in a heterological examination, with one's interlocutors taking the role of the examiners. In the second case but not the first, in other words, it is as if one's utterances are being held to be accountable to an objective standard—a standard that mere sincerity doesn't guarantee.

As in the case of heterological exams, our interlocutors don't have to be gods, to subject our assertions to this kind of 'objective' standard. It is sufficient that they apply the standard on the basis of their own beliefs: if we say 'Aristotle was a Greek' and they believe that he was actually Belgian, they are entitled to say, 'That's not *correct*—your claim is *mistaken*.' Indeed, the main difference between this case and that of the corresponding exams is that conversation is symmetric. Both sides are playing the same game, and each is entitled to act as 'examiner' with respect to the other. (Heterological conversation is the heterological examination of all against all, as it were.)

I hope it is clear that as a matter of fact, our conversational practices are substantially those of heterological conversation rather than autological conversation. In my view, this fact is of great significance for [an understanding of truth]—though its

¹⁶ The phrasing here now seems to me loose by my own standards. The suggestion that correctness be seen as a matter of agreeing with examiners risks putting into the foreground something that properly belongs in the background, by my own expressivist lights. In the heterological case examiners apply the terms 'correct' and 'incorrect' in the light of their own beliefs, but this is not to say that agreeing with the examiners is the goal in the foreground. The goal in the foreground is being correct about the answer to the question asked, and the examiners' use-rule is the key part of the practice that 'institutes' that goal to borrow a phrase from Brandom. (Thanks to Lionel Shapiro on this point.)

significance has usually been overlooked, I think, probably because the relevant features of conversational practice are so familiar as to seem unremarkable. ...

[T]o all intents and purposes, the question ‘What is truth?’ is the same question as ‘What is this correctness and incorrectness, rightness and wrongness, that we claim for various moves in our conversational games?’ The point of the case of autological conversation [as of the MOAs] is to throw the significance of these questions into relief, by pointing out that we can imagine a conversational game that lacks this particular kind of normative standard. And the bare redundancy theory of truth doesn’t address the issue, because the truth predicate it offers us is so thin that it works equally well in either game.

Like most minimalists, Blackburn misses this point. But what he misses is not the fact that conversation has such a normative standard. On the contrary, here he is calling loud attention to it, by way of pointing out where some forms of relativism go wrong:

[T]here is no one place from which it is right to look at the Eiffel tower, and indeed no place that is better than another, except for one purpose or another. But when it comes to our commitments, we cannot think this. If I believe that O. J. Simpson murdered his wife, then I cannot at the same time hold that the point of view that he did not is equally good. It follows from my belief that anyone who holds he did not murder his wife is *wrong*. They may be excusable, but they are out of touch or misled or thinking wishfully or badly placed to judge. I have hit a bull’s-eye, which they have missed. (Blackburn 2005, 65–66, my italics)

Rather, what Blackburn misses is what I’ve highlighted by distinguishing two kinds of conversational games: the fact that there’s something important that needs explaining here, viz., that in the game as we actually play it, there is a norm, or a bull’s-eye, of precisely this kind. At another point he says that ‘[t]o make an assertion at all is to put a view into the public space, up for acceptance and rejection.’ (68) Again, he’s right, but he misses the question: why are our assertions treated like this? Why aren’t a chap’s beliefs treated as entirely his own affair, as it were—as they are, by default, in the game I’ve called autological conversation? ...

It follows that there’s a residual form of Pilate’s question [‘What is truth?’], absolutely untouched by the suggestion that we deflate truth in Ramsey’s way: What are these norms of ‘rightness’ and ‘wrongness’, ‘correctness’ and ‘incorrectness’—this bull’s-eye that distinguishes ordinary heterological conversation from the autological alternative? It might seem tempting to make the notions of rightness and correctness follow truth itself, in walking Ramsey’s deflationary plank—a temptation encouraged by the fact that for many purposes, ‘true’, ‘right’ and ‘correct’ are interchangeable. But this would simply deprive us of Blackburn’s distinction between ways of looking at the Eiffel tower and ways of taking a view about whether O. J. Simpson murdered his wife. For better or worse, our ordinary conversational practice does admit such a distinction, and we can’t sweep it under the carpet simply by forcing all the predicates we use to express it into the minimalist box—the right lesson, rather, is that we were too hasty in forcing truth itself into that box. (Price 2006, 607–610)

10. How MR misses the bull's-eye

MacFarlane, too, is not a deflationist, in Blackburn's Ramseyan sense.¹⁷ He takes deflationism to be incompatible with the project of using the truth predicate in semantics (MacFarlane 2014, 100, fn. 6), a project MR shares with many of its non-relativist rivals. But does MR have an answer to the challenge above? Can it account for Blackburn's bull's-eye? Here's MacFarlane's (2014) proposal, again inspired by Dummett.

Dummett's analogy with games suggests that the connection between truth and assertion is teleological: in making assertions, one represents oneself as aiming to put forward truths. No doubt there is something right about this, but it does not give us a distinguishing feature of *truth*. For, in making assertions, one also represents oneself as aiming to say things for which one has good evidence, and things that are relevant for the purposes of the conversation. Dummett himself notes that it is absurd to think that one could get a grip on the notion of truth simply by being told that it is the aim of assertion (Dummett 1959, 20; cf. Dummett 1981, 299–301).

A more plausible way of getting at the root idea is by giving a normative account of assertion. Instead of saying that assertion aims at the truth, we can say that assertion is constitutively governed by the

Truth Rule. *At a context c, assert that p only if p is true at c.*

To say that the Truth Rule is *constitutive* of assertion is to say that nothing that is not subject to this rule can count as an assertion. It is crucial here to distinguish between the “constitutive rules” that *define* the move of assertion and other kinds of norms that govern it. We can make such a distinction in the case of other game moves. For example, the rule of chess that says you can't castle if the king is in check is partially constitutive of the move of castling. A move that was not subject to this rule would not be castling. Since castling is nothing more than a move in chess, one can say what castling is by articulating all of the constitutive rules for castling: castling is the move that is subject to these rules. Similarly, the thought goes, to give an account of assertion, it is sufficient to articulate its constitutive rules. (2014, 101)

At this point MacFarlane notes that ‘there are other norms governing assertion—for example, norms of politeness, evidence, prudence, and relevance’, but argues that ‘the Truth Rule [is] the sole norm that is constitutive of assertion’ (2014, 102).¹⁸ He continues:

¹⁷ There is an interesting question as to whether he could be. If Ramsey's ladder is horizontal, as Blackburn puts it, then what we say at one end has to be equivalent to what we say at the other, at least for metaphysical purposes. Relativism about truth would end up on a par with a kind of relativism about the properties themselves. It is far from clear that MacFarlane would, or could, embrace such a conclusion.

¹⁸ Here is the complete passage:

Of course, there are other norms governing assertion—for example, norms of politeness, evidence, prudence, and relevance. And these norms can sometimes override the Truth Rule in one's deliberations about what to assert. But one can recognize these things while still taking the Truth Rule to be the sole norm that is constitutive of assertion. Given that assertion is governed by the Truth Rule, and given other facts about our interests and purposes in engaging in conversation, one can explain why assertion is

The Truth Rule is a semantic-pragmatic bridge principle ... It connects a semantic theory—a theory whose output is a definition of truth at a context for arbitrary sentences of a language, and for the propositions they express—with norms for the use of these sentences and propositions. We need not think of either truth or assertion as more fundamental than the other; the bridge principle helps illuminate both. (2014, 102)

Is MacFarlane's Truth Rule sufficient to explain why we are not Mo'ans – in other words, why our conversational practice is heterological rather than autological? I think not.¹⁹ Suppose the two of us disagree about the age of the Earth, to use one of MacFarlane's examples. I say that the Earth is less than a million years old, you say that it is more than a million years old. Or, if we want to be a bit formal, I say that the proposition that the Earth is less than a million years old is *true*, you say that it is *false*. If we were Mo'ans, we would simply have expressed our opinions, and – at least by default – feel no need to engage on the matter.

Does it help to make truth a norm of assertion, as MacFarlane suggests? No, for this just pushes things one step further back. We each think that we have met this norm, and that the other has not, but again, why should we feel any more need to engage about *that*, than about the original disagreement? I made this point in (Price 2003):

If the Mo'ans don't already care about disagreements, why should they care about disagreements about normative matters? Suppose that we two are Mo'ans, that you assert that *p*, and that I assert that not-*p*. If this initial disagreement doesn't bother me, why should it bother me when – trying to implement the third norm – you go on to assert that I am 'at fault', or 'incorrect'? Again, I simply disagree; and if the former disagreement doesn't bite then nor will the latter. And if what was needed to motivate me to resolve our disagreement was *my* acceptance that I am 'at fault', then motivation would always come too late. If I accept this at all, it is only after the fact – after the disagreement has been resolved in your favour.

To get the sequence right, then, I must be motivated by your disapproval itself. This is an important point. It shows that if there could be an assertoric practice which lacked the third norm, we couldn't add that norm simply by adding a normative predicate. In so far – so very far, in my view – as terms such as *true* and *false* carry this normative force in natural languages, they must be giving voice to something more basic: a fundamental practice of expressions of attitudes of approval and disapproval, in response to perceptions of agreement and disagreement between expressed commitments. I'll return to this point, for it is the basis of an important objection to certain other accounts of truth. (2003, 173–174)

governed by these other norms as well. Asserting what is unjustified or irrelevant violates norms of cooperative conversation, but not the norms an act must be subject to in order to count as asserting, just as castling too late in the game violates norms of strategy, but not the norms a move must be subject to in order to count as castling. (MacFarlane 2014, 102)

¹⁹ I don't mean to suggest that MacFarlane claims that the Truth Rule can do this job. The issue of the origin of Blackburn's bull's-eye is not on his radar, I think, so he is not proposing the Truth Rule as a solution to it. My point is that once we do have the issue on our radar, we won't find an answer in MacFarlane's appeal to the Truth Rule.

Later, with Rorty's proposed identification of truth with warranted assertibility in mind, I say this:

I noted above that the same point applies to the normative predicates themselves. If we weren't already disposed to take disagreement to matter, we couldn't do so simply by adding normative predicates, for disagreement about the application of those predicates would be as frictionless as disagreement about anything else. My claim is thus that the notions of truth and falsity give voice to more primitive implicit norms, which themselves underpin the very possibility of 'giving voice' at all [in the heterological sense]. In effect, the above argument rests on the observation that this genealogy cannot be reversed: if we start with a predicate – *warrantedly assertible* or any other – then we have started too late. (179, fn. 22)

In other words, if we don't make it constitutive that assertion is a move in a *cooperative* project – *a game in which players care about normative assessments by other players* – adding the Truth Rule doesn't get us there. It just provides another possible topic for frictionless disagreement. But if we start with the third norm in such a practice, and explain truth and falsity as ways of giving voice to that norm, we don't have to put it in at any later stage.²⁰

11. Friction in the game of giving and asking for reasons

In his earlier piece (MacFarlane 2007), MacFarlane makes similar points by appealing to Brandom's characterisation of assertion as a move in a 'game of giving and asking for reasons'. It would take us too far afield to do justice to the question whether Brandom's own view escapes the threat of the MOA, but I don't think that MacFarlane's use of the view succeeds in doing so. MacFarlane puts the issue like this:

I think that one can do better [than the proposal that assertions aim at truth], at least in the case of speech acts, by talking about the *normative significances* of assertions (or denials) rather than their aims. An assertion is a particular kind of act. Normally, it involves the utterance of a sentence, but it is more than that. What more? What is one doing when one utters a sentence to make an assertion, and not, say, to make a conjecture, or practice pronunciation? One may have various communicative intentions: for example, one may intend to get one's audience to do something, or to believe something, or to believe that one believes something. But none of these intentions is a necessary condition for making an assertion. What is common to every case of assertion, even transparently insincere and soliloquizing assertions, is a certain kind of commitment undertaken by the asserter: a commitment to the truth of the proposition asserted.

But what is it to commit oneself to the truth of a proposition? If we are going to understand assertion as commitment to truth, we need to understand what such a

²⁰ If we start this way it is perfectly safe to model the phenomenology of the game in terms of this truth predicate, and thus generate the semantic notion – but the order of construction is crucial. This is an example of a very general point I have called the Practical Relevance Constraint. More on this below.

commitment requires of one. What is one committed to *doing* (or refraining from doing) when one commits oneself to the truth of a proposition? What would count as honoring this commitment, and what would count as violating it?

The best answer I have seen to this question is Brandom's (1983,1994) —though I will modify his view in several respects, and use it to different ends. On this account, an assertion is fundamentally a move in the "game of giving and asking for reasons." In making an assertion, one licenses others to rely on its accuracy in their actions and reasoning, and one commits oneself to vindicating its accuracy in the face of appropriate challenges. Thus, assertoric commitment is commitment to meeting all legitimate challenges to the accuracy of one's assertion, and to withdrawing the assertion (disavowing the commitment) if one cannot do so. ...

This, then, is the practical significance of the classification of assertions into accurate and inaccurate:

ACCURACY AND CHALLENGES. Accuracy is the property we must show assertions to have in order to vindicate them in the face of challenges, and it is the property we must show others' assertions not to have if our challenges are to be justified. (2007, 27–28)

There is much to like here, from my point of view, but I think that in one important sense it gets things back to front. One way to see this is to note that the reference to truth in this passage is largely dispensable, if we allow the standard kind of paraphrases for stock examples of a disquotational truth predicate. Here is a modified version, made in this spirit. (I use strike-through text to indicate deletions from the original, and square brackets to indicate additions.)

What is common to every case of assertion, even transparently insincere and soliloquizing assertions, is a certain kind of commitment undertaken by the asserter: a commitment to the ~~truth of the~~ proposition asserted. [In other words, a speaker who asserts that P is committed to the proposition P.]

But what is it to commit oneself to ~~the truth of~~ a proposition [P]? If we are going to understand assertion as [propositional] commitment ~~to truth~~, we need to understand what such a commitment requires of one. What is one committed to *doing* (or refraining from doing) when one commits oneself to ~~the truth of~~ a proposition [P]? What would count as honoring this commitment, and what would count as violating it?

The best answer I have seen to this question is Brandom's (1983,1994) ... On this account, an assertion is fundamentally a move in the "game of giving and asking for reasons." In making an assertion ["P"], one licenses others to ~~rely on its accuracy~~ [take for granted that P] in their actions and reasoning, and one commits oneself to vindicating ~~its accuracy~~ [the claim that P] in the face of appropriate challenges. Thus, assertoric commitment is commitment to meeting all legitimate challenges to the accuracy of one's assertion, and to withdrawing the assertion (disavowing the commitment) if one cannot do so.

Does this rewording remove anything essential? The best place to argue that it does do so, in my view, is at the point underlined. It might fairly be objected that there are many ways to challenge an assertion – as in poor taste, for example – and that without the reference to

accuracy, we can't pick out the ones that matter. However, the function of the challenges in question is to ask the speaker to fulfill an obligation to *justify*, or *give reasons for*, the claim in question. This means that we could avoid that last reference to accuracy altogether, by simply making explicit that this is the kind of challenge we have in mind: 'Thus, assertoric commitment is commitment to meeting all legitimate challenges to justify one's assertion, and to withdrawing the assertion (disavowing the commitment) if one cannot do so.'

In other words, while I am very sympathetic with the proposal to tie the function of the notion of truth to the game of giving and asking for reasons (GGAR), I think that MacFarlane's proposal here does not succeed in doing so. As introduced in this passage, the references to truth and accuracy turn out to be inessential.

As for Brandom's account in general, let's note that we can imagine a Mo'an version of a GGAR. Suppose that some members of the Mo'an community set themselves up as gurus, or thought leaders, each with a group of subscribers. The declarative utterances of these gurus are no longer mere MOAs, but carry additional normative significance. They entitle the gurus' subscribers to rely on them, and the gurus themselves incur an obligation to justify them (or else recant), if called on to do so by a registered subscriber.

This is *a* GGAR, but it isn't *our* GGAR, because it lacks the third norm. There are no inter-guru challenges, and subscriber-to-guru challenges have the force simply of 'Justify that!' Nobody is ever telling the gurus that their claims are *false*, or *incorrect*; or, on the other side, commending them for speaking *correctly*, or *truly*. Disagreements between gurus are simply frictionless. They are simply not in the business of criticising each other – perhaps recognising how bad it would be for business, were they to start doing so!

What would it take to move a Mo'an community from this autological version of GGAR to a fully heterological version – the kind we actually have, more or less? As we saw, it can't be done simply by introducing new normative predicates. If gurus don't care what other gurus think, they won't care what they think about these new normative matters. Instead, what has to happen is that gurus (or all speakers, if we are doing this in the regular flat way, without gurus) come to care about disagreements. If they already care about the approval or disapproval of their fellows *in some respects*, then there is a way to achieve caring about disagreements: invent a particular kind of approval or disapproval, tailor-made to the need in question. In other words, bring it about that speakers are disposed to give a sign of approval in response to claims with which they agree, and of disapproval in response to those with which they disagree. This is what it takes to add the third norm, or Blackburn's bull's-eye – and the core claim of my account of truth is that truth and falsity are, first and foremost, expressions of (ways of making explicit) norms that play this essential dialectical role.

This little example does not establish that Brandom's own version of GGAR has trouble explaining the third norm. There might be other routes to it in Brandom's full version, even if it does not enter explicitly – see Shapiro (2021a) for a recent argument of this kind. But I think it does establish that there is work to do. It is far from *obvious* that the third norm is a necessary part of any GGAR whatsoever.

Whether Brandom's GGAR *generates* or rather needs to *presuppose* the third norm, his general orientation is highly congenial, from my point of view. In many places I have aligned myself with pragmatism, in his sense. These remarks, for example, are from the Introduction to a new edition of *Facts and the Function of Truth*.

These days it feels natural to me to put the point in vocabulary I have learnt from Brandom. My view [in FFT] was that the category of factuality is 'instituted by' assertoric language, rather than being *presupposed* and *marked* by it It was the kind of view to which Brandom alludes in passages like these:

The pragmatist direction of explanation ... seeks to explain how the use of linguistic expressions, or the functional role of intentional states, confers conceptual content on them. (Brandom, 2000, 4)

Starting with an account of what one is doing in making a claim, it seeks to elaborate from it an account of what is said, the content or proposition—something that can be thought of in terms of truth conditions—to which one commits oneself by making a speech act. (2000, 12)

FFT offered that kind of account of factuality. In terms I have used more recently (Price 2017, 153), my proposal was that factuality and statementhood were explanatorily *downstream* rather than *upstream* of the assertoric mode of speech. ...

[T]he big take-away messages of FFT – both as I intended them then, in all but terminological details, and as I see them now – are three. First, factuality is downstream rather than upstream of a certain linguistic practice (in Brandom's terms, the game of giving and asking for reasons). Second, truth plays a central normative role in this practice, and is itself best understood (where this means *explained* rather than *analysed*) in terms of this dialectical role. And third, factuality so construed comes by degrees, in the light of the variable prevalence of no-fault disagreements in different discourses – different reasons in different cases, but no pure cases and no sharp bifurcation. (Price 2023, ch. 0)

12. Truth, *Euthyphro*, and the Practical Relevance Constraint

To sum up, the broader of my two objections to MR is that MacFarlane – like Blackburn and many others – misses the essential role in conversational practice of a practice of approving and disapproving of speakers with whom one agrees or disagrees. Without these attitudes, linguistic disagreement simply wouldn't matter to us in the way that it does. In that case, as I've said, no addition of normative labels could then make it matter, because disagreement about these normative matters would be as frictionless as disagreement about anything else.

Once we have this fundamental practice of treating disagreement in this way, labels that we apply to give voice to these dialogical attitudes of approval and disapproval are effectively 'true' and 'false', or the special senses of 'correct' and 'incorrect', applicable to assertions, to which

Dummett's questions direct us. And we have an immediate *explanation* for the fact (in the sense that it is a fact) that truth is what speakers are aiming for, in making their assertions. What they are actually aiming for, unconsciously as it were, is gaining the approval that comes with having their assertions agreed to by others, and avoiding the disapproval of the opposite case. But this looks from the inside like aiming for truth, once 'true' and 'false' are understood as expressions of the relevant sort of approval and disapproval.

One way to understand the disagreement between ME and MR on this broad point is in terms of a *Euthyphro* question. When I agree with a claim made by a fellow speaker, do I endorse what she said *because I take it to be true*? Or should we rather understand *what it is to take a claim to be true* in terms of a practice of endorsing the claims of others? MacFarlane's use of the Truth Rule suggests he takes the former option; whereas my money, as I have said, is on the latter.²¹ The former option cannot explain the *practical relevance* of taking the claims of another to be true or false – its role in our highly non-Mo'an game of giving and asking for reasons, and our sense that there is a single common bull's-eye that all participants in the game strive to hit.

I note in passing that this is an example of what in §4 I called a *Practical Relevance Constraint*. In many instances, an advantage of expressivist accounts of philosophically interesting notions is that by *beginning* with the practical role of the notion in question, they avoid the problem of having to explain it later. A famous case is that of probability, where writers as diverse as Ramsey, William Kneale, D H Mellor and David Lewis have argued that the connection to betting and partial beliefs needs to be built into one's theory from the beginning (see Price 2023, ch. 12, for discussion of this case). Another well-known case involves what Michael Smith (1994) calls 'the moral problem' – the challenge of explaining why evaluative beliefs are relevant to action, in the way in which we take them to be. Indeed, we could think of the point I have just made about truth as a close cousin of the moral problem.

13. Friction, a fiction?

Let's take stock. I disagreed with MR in two ways. First, narrowly, I argued that MR fails to make sense of the phenomenology of disagreements about the so-called subjective matters. MR puts the subjective elements into truth or accuracy conditions, and the effect of that, even in the relativist version, is to stipulate a gap between the commitments of (apparent) disputants – a gap that varies only by degree from the one in Ramsey's example: 'I went to Grantchester. I didn't.' From the perspective of fully competent speakers, the gap *eliminates* the sense of friction, rather than explaining it.

Second, broadly, I argued that MR does not successfully explain friction in ordinary cases, those MacFarlane thinks of as objective, or nonrelative. Again, the problem lies in MR's 'foregrounding' of the norms of truth and falsity. Foregrounded norms cannot yield dialectical friction, where none already exists. To explain the association between truth and friction, we

²¹ Note that the issue is which is the more fundamental direction of explanation. In this case, as in many others, the pragmatist can quite well allow that day-to-day explanation often runs left-to-right, once a practice is in place.

must take truth and falsity to be expressions of friction-generating dispositions already present in the background.

My alternative picture begins with the hypothesis that GGAR (in the full, third-norm-driven version we actually have) is essentially a coordination device. It generates normative pressure for the social creatures who use it to resolve disagreements, and thereby align their commitments about a range of matters. Although I haven't stressed this aspect above, I take it that one of the advantages of this proposal is that it allows the 'commitments' thereby aligned to have many different pragmatic functions, within the lives of the creatures concerned. For example, it will extend both to evaluative and probabilistic commitments, each explained in turn in a pragmatist or expressivist fashion, in terms of its role in decision behaviour and action.

On the surface, as it were, the game is largely blind to these underlying functional differences. At a first pass, what it generates in every case is the sense among players of the game that there is a fact of the matter – Blackburn's bull's-eye – that each of them is striving to hit. The practical manifestation of this is that they are disposed to commend or criticise each other, when they agree or disagree – in other words, as it seems natural to put it within the game, when they think that the other has succeeded or failed in hitting the mark.

As I noted, this is a similar proposal to the one that MacFarlane (2007) floats for what he regards as the subjective cases. The big difference is that I take this same rationale to underlie the *entire* game of giving and asking for reasons, rather than merely a subjective corner of it. Unlike MacFarlane, I don't think that controversy in other cases can be *explained by* a prior notion of truth. On the contrary, the explanation needs to run in the other direction: *from* the controversy-generating coordination game, *to* the idea of a truth on which we try to converge.

For me, the pressure to universalise the coordination model in this way actually comes from two directions. The point I've emphasised above is that, *contra* MR, the universalised view would be needed to *explain* controversy, or friction, even if there were some entirely non-subjective cases – some cases that looked purely nonrelative, by MacFarlane's lights. But as I've also mentioned, I don't think that there are any such cases. All topics are at least latently subjective, because we cannot exclude the possibility that speakers will diverge in their understanding of one of the terms involved. If there were an intelligible alternative to subjectivity, the rule following considerations would put it off limits for finite creatures like us.²²

At this point, many readers may feel that I am abandoning indispensable ground. In MacFarlane's form, the coordination game is naturally read as a kind of make-believe – in subjective cases we speak 'as if' there were an objective matter of fact at issue, in order to help ourselves to the coordinating advantages of factual disagreement. But if we universalise this story, aren't we committed to saying that it is fiction all the way down? Haven't we lost the objective world altogether?

²² For reasons of space I ignore here some interesting objections to my use of the rule following considerations raised by Shapiro (2021b). In any case, Shapiro proposes an alternative that does much the same job.

These are big issues, but, briefly, I want to say ‘Yes, *in a sense*’ to the second question, and therefore ‘No’ to the first. For me, our discourse-wide sense of answerability to an objective world is indeed a product of the game of giving and asking for reasons – it is downstream rather than upstream of the game, as I put it above. The alternative view is ‘a world well lost’.²³ Without this alternative, however, the label ‘fictionalist’ is empty – an attempt to draw an unfavourable comparison to an ideal that is itself unfounded and unavailable to us. As I have noted elsewhere, Schiller makes this observation against Vaihinger’s philosophy of ‘as if’:

The truth is that Prof. Vaihinger’s ingenuity, in detecting fictions everywhere, overreaches itself. He leaves no ‘facts’ to be contrasted with his ‘fictions,’ and in consequence the latter become facts *optimi juris*, and their procedures ‘truths’. (Schiller 1912, 99–100)

This is what I had in mind when I said that ‘fiction’ is a label we can kick away.

14. MR and ME on evaporative disputes

Let’s come back to evaporative disputes. As I’ve said, my view is that GGAR in general is a coordination device, but one that is often quite well adapted to variability with respect to the ‘need’ and value of coordination. It is part of the normal functioning of the game that there are these exit moves – ways of cancelling the norms, in particular disagreements.²⁴ The so-called subjective cases are those in which there is often and obviously a rationale for using these in-built escape hatches. The phenomenology of subjectivity arises from the fact that use of the escape hatches cancels the normal objectivity of the bull’s-eye – the normal presumption that there is a common goal – but we only see this properly for what it is when we understand the source of the latter. Proper play of the game – required for it to serve its coordinative function – requires that the escape hatches initially be ignored. By analogy, imagine a play-fighting game, with a designated escape phrase, say ‘Time out!’, that immediately ends the game when uttered or displayed. For better or worse, participants who wear ‘Time out!’ on their tee shirts never get to experience the phenomenology of the game.

Thus ME maintains that in the tasty cases, disagreement employs exactly the same normatively-loaded game of challenge as disputes about the age of the Earth. The difference is simply that the escape hatches are much closer to the surface in one case than in the other. MR, by contrast, tries to model the operation of the escape hatches in terms of pre-existing relativised semantic values, or something of that kind. I’ve argued that this simply doesn’t work. By putting truth and accuracy in the foreground in this way, and proceeding to relativise them, MR calls ‘Time out!’ before the disagreement ever gets started.

MR thinks of the subjective cases as fundamentally distinct from the objective or non-relative cases, and takes disagreement about the latter to be explained by the Truth Rule, or something

²³ This doesn’t mean that the environment can play no role in my picture, e.g., in explanations of success.

²⁴ There are actually many of these, just some of which are relevant here. The key thing is cancelling the presumption of fault, or genuine disagreement, though MacFarlane and Shapiro have convinced me that this isn’t such a straightforward thing to characterise accurately as FFT assumed.

like it. MR is an attempt to make the subjective cases sufficiently similar to the objective cases – in terms related to what it takes to do the work in those cases – to explain the phenomenology of disagreements about ‘tasty’ and the like. I’ve argued that the attempt doesn’t succeed. Even if its account of the objective cases were satisfactory, MR wouldn’t succeed in bridging this gap.

A great advantage of ME is that it postulates no such gap. Even if it were to recognise cases in which there was no possibility of evaporative disputes – no possible role for the escape hatches – the story it would tell about the source of the phenomenology of disagreement in those cases would be no different from the one it tells about the so-called subjective cases. In all cases, it takes the source of the phenomenology to be the third norm, at the heart of a GGAR. This works for ME, in a way in which it can’t for MR, because of the pragmatist direction of explanation, in Brandom’s sense – in effect, because truth and factuality are regarded as *downstream* rather than *upstream* of the GGAR.²⁵

Certainly, there is a good question why expressions of taste, and other obviously subjective cases, should ever invoke the machinery of a GGAR in the first place. But as we saw, MacFarlane himself has proposed an answer: it has engineering advantages, in communities of social creatures like us. In general, it is an advantage of an expressivist conception of the functional role of commitments of various kinds that it stands back far enough back to consider the question of the merits of ‘making those commitments explicit’ in the framework of the GGAR. As I argued in FFT, we should expect that different communities will draw the line in different places, and should not be surprised to find both practices in use in a single community – as we do, of course, with ‘Yum!’ and ‘That’s tasty!’

15. Formal options

How should we describe this exit-equipped version of the GGAR, if we are interested in modelling its formal properties? We saw that putting a fixed context-relative semantic value in the foreground leads us astray. It loses disagreement, even in MR’s form of the proposal. Provided we were clear about the intended direction of explanation, however, I think we might model things in terms of *changeable* semantic values. The dispute about tasty would begin in objectivist terms, and switch to a contextualist or relativist model when the relevant escape hatch is operated. On this view there would in a sense be a change of subject matter, or truth conditions, as the dispute develops. But this need not be objectionable as it would be if the subject matter were being used to *explain* the dispute behaviour. It’s now the other way round: what the disputants are said to be *saying* is being determined in the light of their (changeable) dispositions to take themselves to be ‘really’ disagreeing.²⁶ This approach might find allies in other dynamic and highly contextual approaches to meaning, such as Charles Travis’s radical ‘occasion-sensitivity’ (see, e.g., Travis 2000).

However, if we want a formalisation that makes better contact with what a pragmatist will regard

²⁵ This is what I meant at the end of §4, when I said that my expressivism about truth plays a foundational role in my expressivism about all other topics.

²⁶ Thus *saying* downstream of *doing*, in Brandomian terms.

as the explanatory basis of the relevant phenomena, we need to look somewhere else. Here Shapiro's (2014) suggestion is attractive. As I noted, Shapiro points out that the linguistic phenomena on which MacFarlane and other recent relativists have focussed have a substantial overlap with the NFDs of FFT. However, Shapiro feels that these relativists are addressing the issues posed by such cases in the wrong key:

The last decade has seen an explosion of interest in relativism in the philosophy of language. Relativist accounts have been proposed to explain discourse about knowledge, epistemic possibility, matters of taste, and contingent future events. In this context, relativism is usually taken to be, or to presuppose, a *semantic* thesis. According to relativists, understanding how some discourses function requires recognizing that speakers express propositions whose truth or falsity must be evaluated relative to parameters in addition to a possible world ...

In this paper, I propose a different way to think about how the discourses in question motivate relativism in the philosophy of language. The central thrust of relativism, I argue, can and should be understood independently of any semantic framework of relativized truth. Instead, relativism should be understood in *pragmatic* terms, as corresponding to a particular understanding of assertoric force. The idea starts with Robert Brandom's analysis of "fact-stating discourse" (1994: 607) as a "game of giving and asking for reasons" whose basic move is *asserting*. Brandom's account of assertion makes no appeal to truth. My proposed revision of his analysis makes room for a broader conception of fact-stating discourse, by allowing *assertoric force* to depend on speakers' perspectives. What is distinctive and plausible about relativism, I will argue, is best captured by the resulting liberalized version of Brandom's game of giving and asking for reasons. (Shapiro 2014, 139–140)

Specifically, Shapiro proposes an amendment to Brandom's account of the 'authority' claimed by someone who makes an assertion. According to Brandom, as Shapiro puts it: 'the *authority* claimed in asserting a proposition is to license others to assert the same proposition and use it as a premise in their theoretical and practical reasoning.' (2014, 153) Shapiro suggests that to capture 'what is distinctive and plausible about relativism', we should restrict this claimed authority:

Stated generally, the idea is that *assertoric force* has a perspectival aspect. On this view, an assertion may carry its licensing potential not vis-à-vis its entire potential audience, but rather vis-à-vis a target audience restricted to those who share a particular perspective. (2014, 154)

I think this is a very promising framework for exploring these issues. As I noted, the language of perspective and subjectivity is at the core of my own version of expressivism. True, it isn't immediately clear that my use of these notions is compatible with Shapiro's use of them – see (Shapiro 2021b) for some dissent from Shapiro's side) – but Shapiro's insistence on fitting them into a *pragmatic* rather than a *semantic* framework is clearly congenial, from my point of view. It is

of a piece with my wish to think of the pragmatic grounds of our claims as lying ‘in the background’, rather than in the truth conditions of what is asserted.

15. Varieties of pragmatism

I want to steer things in the direction of a concluding comparison between MR and ME, within the broad framework of an interest in naturalism and placement problems. Shapiro’s (2014) discussion is helpful again. For one thing, Shapiro classifies MacFarlane as a pragmatist, ‘once again in line with Price’ (2014, 145). While there is something correct about this, MR’s pragmatism is in some respects different from mine, and I want to try to clarify these differences..

In a section entitled ‘Relativism as a pragmatist strategy’, Shapiro begins like this:

Recent relativists have followed Price in rejecting two familiar explanations according to which the appearance of evaporative disputes ... is an illusion. According to these explanations, apparent evaporative disputes are cases where [the condition that there is a single proposition that one party has affirmed, and the other has denied] isn’t actually satisfied. Contrary to appearances, the parties don’t take the relevant facts to be different: they are not, respectively, affirming and denying the same proposition. Both explanations accomplish this by denying that the apparent subject-matter of the target discourses should be taken at face value. They may therefore be classified as *metaphysically eliminativist* regarding this apparent subject-matter.

One such option is a *nonfactualist expressivism*. On this view, as applied to predicates of personal taste and epistemic modals, we must reject the appearance that ‘tasty’ is used to ascribe any property, and that ‘it’s possible that ...’ is used to assert the obtaining of any states of affairs. Instead, we use these words to express various states of mind. In the case of ‘tasty’, this is the state of finding something’s taste appealing. In the case of ‘It’s possible that ...’, it is the state of leaving open some possibility. (2014, 144)

For clarity, I note again that this is not what I mean by ‘expressivism’. Nor, I think, is it an accurate description of the view of other prominent recent expressivists, such as Blackburn, Gibbard, Dreier and Schroeder (see §3, fn. 1). Like me, all these authors would be inclined to say that *at least in a deflationary sense*, there is a property of being tasty. This kind of expressivism is better described as *metaphysically deflationary*, rather than *metaphysically eliminativist*. Still, the eliminativist version needs to be marked on maps of the territory. (As we saw in §3, it is the version that figures on MacFarlane’s own initial map.)²⁷

Shapiro continues:

²⁷ I don’t mean to suggest that Shapiro is confused about these points. Nor do I deny that some of the expressivists on this list – e.g., Gibbard (2003) and Schroeder (2015) – would *also* recognise a non-deflationary sense of the question whether there is a property of being tasty, and agree that they are eliminativists about it in that sense.

A second metaphysically eliminativist option is a *traditional (“indexical”) contextualism*. On that view, we use ‘tasty’ to attribute various perfectly “objective” properties, such as that of tasting good to a particular person, or group of people, at a particular time. But there’s no such property as that of being tasty, *simpliciter*. Likewise, according to contextualism about epistemic modal expressions, we use these to affirm various perfectly objective states of affairs concerning what’s compatible with a given person’s, or group’s, body of information (DeRose 1991). But there’s no such property as that of possibly having Lyme disease, *simpliciter*. (2014, 145)

‘By contrast’, Shapiro says,

the relativist response to apparent evaporative disputes isn’t metaphysically eliminativist. Indeed, the relativist’s pronouncements in a metaphysical key are often indistinguishable from those of the “absolutist.” For example, MacFarlane affirms that there is such a property as being tasty, *simpliciter*. The predicate ‘tasty’, he says, “invariantly expresses a single property, the property of being tasty” (2014: 152, 105). As he recounts, he has come to believe that this property is not possessed by fish sticks (2007: 20; 2014: 13-14). Relativists about epistemic modality should likewise agree that there’s a property a species has when *it’s possible that it isn’t a rodent*. Studies in molecular phylogenetics, I’m told, have revealed that the guinea pig has this property.

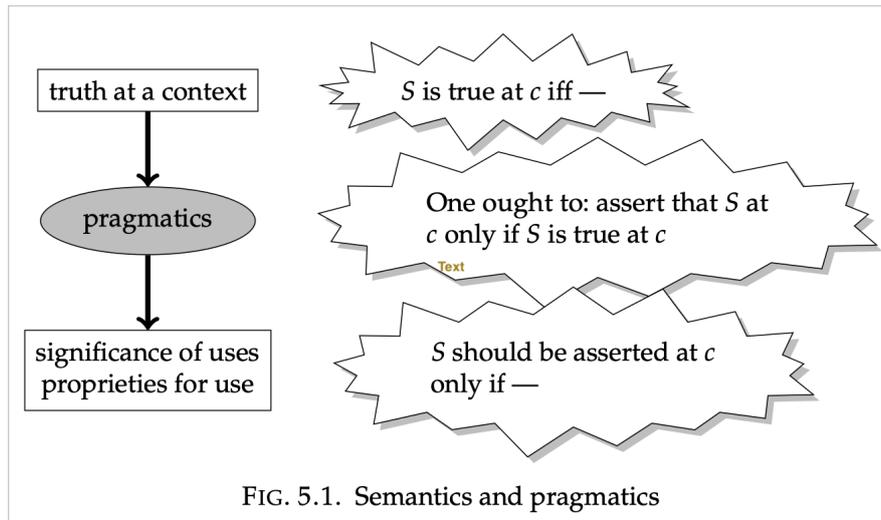
How, then, does relativism differ from absolutism about tastiness and epistemic possibility? What might it mean to say that a property or state of affairs is “subjective” rather than “objective”? Addressing these questions by appealing to *relative truth* needn’t amount to offering a metaphysical answer. Instead, MacFarlane’s answer is a pragmatist one: once again in line with Price, he focuses on how the vocabularies at issue fit into the normative structure of the practice of assertion.

... My aim here isn’t to establish that relativism about epistemic possibility or matters of taste is superior to its metaphysically eliminativist rivals, nonfactualism and contextualism. Rather, I’ll be defending a new way of understanding and elaborating the thought, shared by Price and MacFarlane, that “fact-stating” discourse admits of degrees of objectivity. (2014, 145)

This passage will be helpful below in explaining what MR and ME have in common. First, however, I want to make sure that it doesn’t obscure some differences. Pragmatism is a broad church, and Shapiro’s remark that MR is ‘in line’ with ME might be taken to imply that MacFarlane and I sit in the same pew. But there are several respects in which MR and ME are, or maybe, different varieties of pragmatism.²⁸ I’ll identify two of these differences here, and leave a (possible) third to the next section.

First, most clearly, MacFarlane’s own use of ‘pragmatic’ is narrower than mine (or Brandom’s). It is tied to a conventional semantic–pragmatic distinction in philosophy of language. As I noted in §10, MacFarlane describes his proposed Truth Rule as ‘a semantic–pragmatic bridge principle’

²⁸ Among other things, as we’ll see, ME has a better claim to be high-church pragmatism, when the high church in question is the Pittsburgh Cathedral of Learning!



(2014, 102, illustrating it with the diagram reproduced above. This means that MacFarlane’s use of ‘pragmatic’ has no particular allegiance to pragmatism in Brandom’s sense – a view about the order of explanatory priority between use and propositional content. MacFarlane may be a pragmatist in the stronger sense too, *at least about some matters* – more on this below – but in so far as he is focussing ‘on how the vocabularies at issue fit into the normative structure of the practice of assertion’, as Shapiro puts it, it is the weaker sense of ‘pragmatic’ that captures what he is doing. Whereas my view, as I have said, is pragmatist in the stronger sense from the beginning. Since FFT, I have taken factuality and content to be everywhere downstream rather than upstream of the GGAR.

The second point follows on. There is a sense in which I disagree with MacFarlane, when he says that ‘[w]e need not think of either truth or assertion as more fundamental than the other.’ There is a clear direction of explanatory priority in my expressivism about truth, as about other topics. Truth is explained as the expression of a norm that I claim to play a necessary role in any (full) GGAR. In that sense, I take assertion to be more fundamental than truth. (Again, I take this to be the order of priority that Brandom calls pragmatism.)

Nevertheless, Shapiro is correct that there is considerable overlap between ME and MR, in their treatment of the so-called subjective cases. For me, as I have said, this class includes everything, to varying degrees, but let’s set that difference aside. How much do MacFarlane and I agree, in the cases we both take to be subjective? In §4 I described my version of expressivism as a recipe with five main ingredients. This provides a natural way to frame the question: How many of these ingredients can also be found in MR’s recipe for the subjective cases? And where they can’t be found, what ingredient does MR use instead?

16. ME and MR – the bake-off

Let’s run through the list of ingredients of expressivism that I gave in §4, asking in case whether MR uses the same ingredient, and if not, then what it uses instead.

1. ‘One important ingredient is ... a use-first approach to meaning. Expressivism focusses on how words are *used*, rather than what they are *about*.’

In this respect MR is clearly closer to contextualism than to expressivism. Like contextualism, MR puts the relevant subjective factors into truth conditions. Where it differs is in adding the relevance of context of assessment, but this looks by my lights a refinement of the contextualist’s notion of truth conditions, rather than a move to replace it with a non-truth-conditional characterisation of the meaning of the claims concerned.

In §4 I described my response to RDR, and noted that RDR can also be described as a variety of pragmatism, in view of its claim that the concepts in question ‘implicate subjects’, as Pettit (1991, 587) puts it.²⁹ As I explained, I argued in (Price 1991) that RDR takes the wrong path to pragmatism, choosing the wrong option at a fork where truth-conditional and use-based approaches diverge. On the face of it, MR takes the same path as RDR. This is the third of my three senses in which MR and ME are different kinds of pragmatism – in this respect ME seems to differ from MR just as it differs from RDR.³⁰

My caution here stems from the fact that Shapiro distinguishes MR from contextualism, saying that the latter but not the former is ‘metaphysically eliminativist’ – MacFarlane, he notes, insists ‘that there is such a property as being tasty, *simpliciter*.’ I have lumped RDR and contextualism together here. Doesn’t Shapiro’s point therefore call into question my claim that MR takes effectively the same path as RDR? On balance, however, I think it is to leave this claim as it is, and to pick up the ‘metaphysical’ sense in which MR and ME are on the same page under the headings of the remaining ingredients.

2. ‘A second ingredient is a programme that presents itself as an alternative to reductive metaphysics. It may be motivated in the same way by so-called placement problems, but it combines an insistence that these be regarded as *initially* linguistic or psychological issues – Why do we talk or think this way? – with a renunciation of the ‘representational’ moves that lead from there back to metaphysics.’

It might seem that ME and MR are going to differ with respect to this ingredient, too. After all, as Shapiro says:

MacFarlane affirms that there is such a property as being tasty, *simpliciter*. The predicate ‘tasty’, he says, “invariantly expresses a single property, the property of being tasty” (2014: 152, 105). (Shapiro 2014, 145)

However, the significance of this (apparent) difference depends on what hangs on this claim, by MacFarlane’s lights. If it led him in the direction of metaphysical puzzles – e.g., How can there

²⁹ RDR was taken to be relying on a generalisation of the notion of secondary qualities, and linked to Putnam’s suggestion that Kant’s pragmatism be thought of as the view that everything is a secondary quality.

³⁰ It is true, as we have seen, that MacFarlane connects MR’s views about truth conditions to norms for assertion. This makes MR more thoroughly pragmatist than a version of RDR that neglected this step would be. But it doesn’t eliminate the difference between ME and MR, with respect to this first ingredient.

be a place for the property of being tasty in a natural world? Can tastiness be analysed in naturalistic terms? – then it would certainly mark an additional respect in which MR and ME diverge. But if it can be read in a deflationary spirit, then there need be nothing here to trouble an expressivist. As I have noted, the key issue is whether the existence of such properties does significant explanatory work. This brings us to the third ingredient.

3. ‘A third ingredient ... is an explanatory programme. It aims, roughly speaking, to account for the *existence* and *practical relevance* of the vocabularies in question; typically the former in terms of the latter, in some way. Why do creatures like us employ these terms and concepts? And why do these terms and concepts exhibit distinctive links to various aspects of our practical lives?’

We have already seen that MacFarlane and I are on much the same page, in this respect, in asking why creatures like us come to speak ‘in objective mode’ about what are, at base, subjective matters. The details of the answers we offer are different in the ways already described, but the explanatory orientation is the same. This is particularly clear in passages in which MacFarlane adopts what he calls the engineering approach:

Here it is useful to take an engineering approach to the bits of language we have [been considering]. An engineer building a device needs to start from a description of what the device is supposed to do. So, we will start by asking what these putatively assessment-sensitive bits of language are *for*. What role do they play in our lives? What purposes do they serve? With this job description in hand, we can consider whether the assessment-sensitive semantics serves these purposes better than a contextualist or invariantist semantics could. An affirmative answer will count as a vindication of the rationality of assessment-sensitive practices. For concreteness, we will focus on one case—that of knowledge attributions—but the considerations are easily generalized. (2014, 310)

Turning to the knowledge case, he begins like this:

Why do we talk about what people know, and not just what is true and what people believe? Plausibly, our knowledge talk serves our need to keep track of who is authoritative about what: who can be properly relied on as an informant on a given topic (Craig 1990; Chrisman 2007). If we are considering buying a motorcycle and want advice, we will ask for someone who knows a lot about motorcycles. When we say that someone’s beliefs do not amount to knowledge, we are saying not to trust or rely on them in this matter. When we criticize people who act on mere belief (not knowledge), it is for acting rashly, relying on sources that are not authoritative. (2014, 310)

The questions MacFarlane asks here are certainly in what I call ‘linguistic’ rather than ‘material’ model. In other words, the issue is ‘Why do we talk this way?’, not ‘What is this thing we call knowledge?’ And there is no hint in his answer of the sort of representational perspective that takes us back to the material level (as there would be if the answer were something like ‘We’re keeping track of a distinctive kind of mental state, and that’s important for these reasons ...’. We’re keeping track of *something*, in MacFarlane’s view – i.e., of ‘who is authoritative about

what’ – but, in the standard expressivist manner, that’s not in any sense the content of what we say.

Of the authors MacFarlane cites here, Chrisman (2007) is avowedly an expressivist, and Craig is widely taken that way. A notable recent example of this reading of Craig is that of Hannon (2019), who calls his own Craig-inspired view ‘epistemic pragmatism’, citing Chrisman (2007) and adding this explanation of his terminology:

In other philosophical contexts it might be important to emphasize the differences between myself and other so-called pragmatists, but for the purposes of this chapter these differences may be ignored. I use this word because it loosely reflects an attitude or approach that I share with pragmatists such as Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Price. These authors seek to dismiss or demote philosophical puzzles in favor of more practical questions about the roles and functions of the words and concepts in terms of which we talk and think about the things that lead to philosophical puzzles. This type of pragmatism has a second-order, or linguistic, focus. An epistemic pragmatist will investigate the role of the term or concept “knowledge.” (180)

In other words, it seems uncontroversial that MR and ME are on the same page, concerning my third ingredient. And this means that MacFarlane’s affirmation, as Shapiro puts it, ‘that there is such a property as being tasty, *simpliciter*’ (Shapiro 2014, 145), is not the kind of heavy-duty metaphysical claim that troubles contemporary naturalists. MR avoids heavy-duty metaphysics in exactly the way that ME does. In other words, it brings the case within the scope of what I have called *subject naturalism* – naturalism about ourselves – in contrast to *object naturalism*.

4. ‘A fourth ingredient ... rests on identification of *features of speakers* – typically features of practical or pragmatic significance – that play characteristic roles in expressivist accounts of particular vocabularies.’

This ingredient is also shared, for much the same reason. MacFarlane and I are asking similar ‘engineering’ questions, and presumably relying on similar assumptions about what features of speakers are particularly relevant, in each case.

5. ‘The fifth ingredient, finally, is a kind of perspectivalism, with the pragmatic grounds of a vocabulary playing the role of the perspective from which the users of that vocabulary speak. ... What we took to be in need of *metaphysical* investigation is instead explained as a perspectival matter, in which features of our own situation carry the main explanatory burden.’

Again, this ingredient is largely shared. If we took this to be the fundamental claim, then ME and MR would be two ways of advancing it, and I would end up agreeing with Schroeder that expressivism is relativism done right – at least if ME and MR are taken to be the representative versions of the views in question.

17. Conclusion

The biggest differences I have identified between MR and ME concern the treatment of disagreement. I have argued that MacFarlane's account is unsatisfactory both narrowly, in its treatment of the so-called subjective cases, and broadly, in its treatment of cases assumed to be fully objective. I have explained how ME claims to do better, by extending the expressivist or pragmatist methodology more thoroughly to truth itself, and, as a kind of by-product of that, by denying that there are any purely objective cases. The latter point means that ME is a global view, in a sense in which MR is not. These differences aside, however, MR and MR are very similar in their approach to the placement problems that trouble contemporary naturalists. In particular, they agree that in their usual form, these problems tend to result from asking the wrong questions. The right questions are those that reflect the engineering stance on our own linguistic behaviour.³¹

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