How to Be a Relativist About Truth

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In my first year of college, I went to see a talk by James Randi, the magician turned paranormal debunker. I still remember his description of the Transcendental Meditation movement's three-step program for "Yogic Flying," or levitation. In the first step you meditate, repeating the catchy mantra "Relationship of body and akasha: lightness of cotton fiber" while twitching your leg muscles. In the second step you hop about in the lotus position. And in the third step, you begin to float above the ground. Practitioners were comforted with the thought that, although they had not yet levitated, they were two-thirds of the way there!

My program for "how to be a relativist about truth" also has three steps. The third step—our goal—is to understand the significance of relative-truth talk. When confused undergraduates say, for example, "That's true for me, but not for Sarah," they usually seem to mean only "I believe that, but Sarah doesn't." Presumably relativists do not mean to defend the doctrine that *taking-true* is relative, which is hardly controversial. How, then, should we understand their relative-truth talk? Before we can answer this question, however, we need to clarify the explanandum—and this is step two. Truth—*of what?*—is relative—*in what way?*—*to what?* Answering this question requires an appreciation of the *motivations* for relativism about truth. So step one is to understand why one might want to be a relativist about truth. As with Yogic Flying, step one is the easiest, step two is more difficult, and step three is the hardest. But I hope that even if you do not follow me all the way, you will be content to be two-thirds of the way to full enlightenment.

1 Why be a relativist?

Traditionally, relativism about truth has been motivated by worries about what we might call "deficient objectivity." Consider the following pairs of claims:

(1a) Sam: "Tomatoes are poisonous."

(1b) Sal: "Tomatoes are not poisonous."

(2a) Sam: "Tomatoes are delicious."

(2b) Sal: "Tomatoes are not delicious."

All of these have the form of objective claims about the world, rather than subjective expressions of attitude. And in each pair, the (b) has the form of the (a)'s negation. But there seems to be a real difference between the pairs. Everyone will grant that there is a "fact of the matter" about whether (1a) or (1b) is correct, and that if (1a) is correct, (1b) is incorrect. When it comes to (2a) and (2b), however, people will hesitate to draw the same conclusions. While they might endorse one of the pair, they will hesitate to call the other "incorrect." And they will be much less likely to call for settling the dispute through investigation of the world. It's not that they believe facts about deliciousness are somehow inaccessible to us; rather, they are not confident that there are facts about deliciousness at all—at least not in the same sense as there are facts about poisonousness. *De gustibus non disputandum.*

Philosophers have found several ways to deal with this perceived "objectivity deficit:"[1]

1. *Deny that there is an objectivity deficit.* Argue that the appearance of an objectivity deficit is misleading. Questions about deliciousness are every bit as objective as questions about poisonousness. Granted, we do not have effective ways of reaching general agreement about what is delicious—as we do about what is poisonous—but that is due to our own incapacity, or to interfering factors that prevent the truth from becoming manifest to everyone, or to vagueness or indeterminacy.

2. *Deny that (2a) and (2b) are incompatible.* Argue that the word "delicious" is covertly indexical: it means something like "tastes good to me." Tomatoes can taste good to Sam without tasting good to Sal, so (2a) and (2b) are compatible.

[1] For similar lists of options, see Wright 2001: 48–53, Kölbel 2002.

3. *Deny that (2a) and (2b) are really claims about the world.* Argue that their role is not to take a stand on how things are (either with the external world or with the speaker's tastes) but to express an attitude. They class with "Hooray for Charley!" or "Drat!" rather than with "Snow is white."

4. *Argue that (2a) and (2b) have only relative or perspectival truth values.* Try to make sense of the idea that (2a) can be true for one person (or from one perspective) and false for another person (or from another perspective). In this way we might seek to account for the "objectivity deficit"—there are no *absolute* truth values here—without denying that (2a) and (2b) are genuine claims about the world, and without denying that they are incompatible in the sense that both cannot be true *for the same person*, or *from the same perspective*. Of the four approaches, this is perhaps the most popular with philosophical novices and the least popular with professionals.[2]

The way to argue from an apparent objectivity deficit to relativism is to argue that all of the other options here are *prima facie* unattractive.[3] Option 1 lacks a persuasive explanation of the appearance of objectivity deficit. Option 2 has no good explanation of why we tend to *treat* (2a) and (2b) as contradictory. For example, if someone says "Tomatoes are delicious," we may reply "No, they're not." We don't behave this way with sentences we regard as indexical. If you are talking to your brother in Cleveland and he says "It's raining," you don't say "No, it's not, it's sunny outside." Option 3 faces the familiar Frege/Geach problem: how do we understand occurrences of "tomatoes are delicious" in embedded contexts, like "If tomatoes are delicious, then Bobby will want some"?[4]

It would be difficult to show conclusively that none of these other options can be made to work. Indeed, the right question is probably not "Which option works?" but "Which option works the best?" But all I am looking for here is a compelling reason to try to make sense of relativism about truth, not a knock-down argument that we *must* be relativists. And it seems to me that the obvious difficulties facing Options 1–3 are already sufficient reason to put Option 4 on the table as another alternative. However, Option 4 has had far fewer defenders than the others—at least in analytic circles—and is often not considered a viable alternative at all. Why is this?

There is, of course, Plato's famous argument (in the *Theaetetus*) that relativism about truth is self-undermining. But whatever its merits, this argument is irrele-

[2]The most well worked-out version of this strategy is Kölbel 2002.

[3]This is Kölbel's strategy.

[4]See Geach 1960, Geach 1965.

vant here. It has force only against a global relativism: a view on which *none* of our claims, including our claims about relativism, have "absolute" truth values (truth values that do not vary with perspective).[5] But only a local relativism is called for to handle cases of objectivity deficit. We can allow that (1a) and (1b) have absolute truth values without conceding that (2a) and (2b) do. Indeed, a global relativism that put the 1's and the 2's in the same basket would not help explain the felt difference between them.

The main reason, I think, that Option 4 has not found its way to the table is that it hasn't been clear enough what is *meant* by talk of relative or perspectival truth. Philosophers will say: "I know what it means to say that P is true, but what does it mean to say that P true for X, or from a perspective Y?" Until this question can be answered, Option 4 is just nonsense, and not an option at all.

Moreover, many philosophers think that truth is a simple concept, or "true" a simple word, whose meaning is more or less exhausted by its role as a device of semantic ascent. From this "deflationary" point of view, talk of relative truth is obviously nonsensical. Indeed, if the deflationist is correct, we shouldn't expect to get any purchase on the objectivity deficit problem by talking about truth, for whenever there is an objectivity deficit in some claim P, we will find the same objectivity deficit in the claim that P is true. What is needed, then, to make sense of relative truth, is a "robust" explanation of the concept of truth, one that gives some significance to the claim that a sentence, proposition, or assertion is "true relative to a perspective." I will attempt such an explanation in section 3.

I believe that the argument from objectivity deficit, which is the traditional motivation for relative truth, is already a powerful reason to take relativism about truth seriously. But I don't think it is the only reason, and it is not what got *me* to take relativism seriously. What got me interested was the realization that some otherwise intractable problems in truth-conditional semantics could be solved if we had relative truth in our armamentarium. I can't discuss these cases in any detail here,[6] but let me just sketch two of them briefly.

1. *Future contingents.* If Jake asserts that there will be a sea battle tomorrow, in a context where the future is objectively undetermined, how should we assess his assertion for truth or falsity? Traditionally there are two options: we can say that on account of the future's being unsettled, Jake's claim is neither true nor false, or we can say that despite the future's being unsettled, Jake's claim has a

[5] Indeed, as Kölbel 2002: 126–8 notes, it may have force only against the highly subjectivist form of global relativism advocated by Protagoras.

[6] If you are interested, there are some relevant papers on my web site: `http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~jmacf/work.shtml`

determinate truth value (true or false). Neither option is altogether satisfactory, I think.

If we consider Jake's claim at the moment he makes it, then it seems right to call it neither true nor false, since there are two objectively possible futures, and no feature of the context of use decides between them. Declaring that one of these futures is privileged as the "actual" one threatens to make hash of the idea that both are objectively possible.

But if we consider Jake's claim retrospectively, when the sea battle has already happened (or not), it seems quite wrong to say that it was not true (or false). When we see the muzzle flash of the canons, we learn that what Jake said was true. And once his claim has been vindicated in this way, it can stand even in the face of a proof that it was still unsettled at the moment the claim was made whether there would be a sea battle. If we assume that one is compelled to withdraw assertions that have been proven to have been untrue—a reasonably weak assumption about the relation of truth and assertion—it follows that Jake's assertion was not untrue, and so *a fortiori* not "neither true nor false."

What to do, then? There seem to be compelling arguments both for assigning a definite truth value to future contingents and for taking them to be neither true nor false. If we could make sense of relative truth, however, we could give both arguments their due. We could say that Jake's claim is neither true nor false relative to the moment it is made, but true relative to the future tomorrow in which a sea battle is taking place and false relative to the future tomorrow in which no sea battle is taking place.[7]

2. *Epistemic modals.* Claims like "It may be that Joe is in Boston" are puzzling. In some ways, they behave like covert claims about what we know. We move easily between "It may be that Joe is in Boston," "For all I know, it may be that Joe is in Boston," and "I don't know that Joe is not in Boston." This has led many theorists to argue that "It may be that Joe is in Boston" is true just in case the utterer (or perhaps a larger contextually salient group) does not know (at the time of utterance) that Joe is not in Boston.[8]

The problem is that we do not seem to use epistemic modals to make subject-centered claims about what we (or some larger group) know, as the contextualist

[7] See MacFarlane 2003 and the more detailed discussion in my "Three Grades of Truth Relativity."

[8] See Hacking 1967, Teller 1972, DeRose 1991. Note that DeRose's account has a few additional complexities, motivated by counterexamples in the literature: for example, on his account, the utterer (or contextually salient group) must not be in a position to come to know through a contextually relevant "way of knowing."

account proposes. Suppose I said "It may be that Joe is in Boston." You might reply: "No, you're wrong, he can't be in Boston: I just saw him in Los Angeles." If I believed you, I would retract my claim. We would both treat your claim that Joe can't be in Boston as incompatible with my claim that Joe might be in Boston. We would do this, I suggest, whether or not you were a member of the group of knowers that was "contextually salient" in the context of utterance—even if, for example, you were a total stranger lurking behind the bushes. This feature of our use of epistemic modals is hard to explain on a contextualist account. I certainly would not retract an earlier claim that I did not *know* that Joe was not in Boston in the face of your proof that he is not there.

So this is the puzzle. Epistemic modals are clearly used to mark things out as known or not known. But they do not seem to function as claims about any particular subject's (or group's) knowledge or lack of knowledge, since they can be challenged by considerations that have nothing to do with what the relevant subject (or group) knew when the claim was made. How, then, should we understand them? I have argued elsewhere that if we have relative truth in our toolkit, we can give a semantics for epistemic modals that explains these otherwise puzzling features of their use. On the account I have proposed, my assertion that it may be that Joe is in Boston is true for assessors who do not know that Joe is not in Boston, and false for assessors who know that Joe is not in Boston. So (in our example), you are right say that I'm wrong, because my claim is false—for you. And I am right to retract my claim, because now that I have come to know, through your testimony, that Joe is not in Boston, my claim is false for me, too.[9]

What these and other cases[10] show, I think, is that relative truth might be a useful tool for the semanticist—provided we can make sense of it! Thus relative truth can be motivated in at least two ways: from the traditional objectivity deficit considerations or as a way out of otherwise intractable difficulties in the semantics of natural language. Both of these considerations are likely to motivate only a local relativism about truth, so self-refutation arguments aimed at global versions of relativism need not detain us. The main obstacle is that we do not yet know

[9]For a fuller elaboration of the case against contextualist semantics for epistemic modals, including an exploration of various strategies by which the contextualist account might be defended, see my "Epistemic Modalities and Relative Truth." For an independent attempt to motivate and develop a relative-truth semantics for epistemic modals, see Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson, forthcoming.

[10]See my discussion of Lewisian "accommodation" in "Three Grades of Truth Relativity" and my discussion of knowledge-attributing sentences in "The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions."

what "true for X" talk *means*, so the relativist's main task is to explain this. We'll turn to this in section 3. But first, let us get clearer about the explanandum.

2 Stating the position

Saying simply that "truth is relative" does not get us very far. Truth *of what*? Sentences? Propositions? Utterances? Beliefs? And *to what* is their truth relative? Before we try to make sense of relativism about truth, we ought to say with generality and precision what it amounts to. But this is not as easy as one might suppose.

Nobody thinks that sentences—that is, sentence *types*—have "absolute" truth values.[11] Take the sentence "I have been to China." Is it—the sentence itself, not what I say when I utter it—true? The question is confused. The sentence has a truth value only relative to a context of use. The claim that truth is relative in *this* sense is not interesting or controversial.

Perhaps the relativist's thesis is that sentence *tokens*—particular concrete inscriptions or acoustic blasts—do not have absolute truth values. But what should we say about the token of "I'll be back in five minutes" that is written on the post-it note on my file cabinet? It does not seem to have an absolute truth value; sometimes it expresses a truth, other times a falsehood. But I can acknowledge this without being a relativist in any interesting sense.

Here the relativist might appeal to a distinction between sentence tokens and the *utterances* they are used to make. An utterance (in the sense relevant here) is an *act*: specifically, a speech act like asserting or supposing. If I use my post-it note to assert (in writing) that I will be back in five minutes, my act counts as one utterance; if I do the same thing the next day, that is another utterance, using the same sentence token as a vehicle. The relativist thesis might be put this way: one and the same utterance can be true, relative to X, and false, relative to Y. This sounds more like a controversial thesis.

But there is something a bit odd about calling utterances or assertions, in the "act" sense, true or false at all.[12] We characterize actions as correct or incorrect, but not as true or false. We say "his aim was true," but not "his aim*ing* was true." It might be suggested that although "true" and "false" do not apply to all kinds of actions, they do apply to certain speech acts. However, it sounds funny to say

[11] By "sentence" I will mean "interpreted sentence," a syntactic string *with a meaning.* So we can dispense with relativizing sentence truth to an interpretation or language.

[12] I am guilty of speaking this way myself, in MacFarlane 2003.

"That speech act was true" or "What he did in asserting that sentence was true." This suggests that when we say "His assertion was false" or "That was a true utterance," we are using "assertion" and "utterance" to refer to what is asserted, and not to the *act* of asserting.[13] If that is right, then speech acts are not the proper bearers of relative truth values.

Similar considerations apply to the suggestion that *beliefs* are the things whose truth values are "relative." "Belief" is ambiguous in much the same way as "assertion." It can be used to refer to a *state* of a subject—Joe's believ*ing* that newts are a kind of reptile—or to what is believed—that newts are a kind of reptile. When we say "Joe's belief is true," we are talking about the content of his belief, not the belief-state. To see this, note that we can rephrase "Joe's belief is true" as "What Joe believes is true," but not as "Joe is in a true state."

All of this suggests that the relativist doctrine should be stated as a claim about the truth of the things that are believed or asserted: propositions.[14] This strategy is also suggested by the traditional view that sentences, assertions, and beliefs are true or false by virtue of expressing propositions that have these truth values. If propositions are "the primary bearers of truth values" in this sense, then it seems reasonable to suppose that a relativist about truth should be a relativist about the truth of propositions. And this is the way most relativists go. For example, Max Kölbel characterizes as "non-tame relativism" any view of the form

(RP) For any x that is a proposition of a certain kind K, it is relative to P whether x is true. (Kölbel 2002: 119)

But if *this* is what relativism about truth amounts to, there are a lot more relativists out there than anyone thought. For isn't it an entirely mainstream view that propositions can have different truth values relative to different circumstances of evaluation? The proposition that dodos are extinct in 2004 is true in the actual world, but we can certainly describe possible worlds relative to which the very same proposition is false. Surely that does not vindicate relativism in any interesting sense.

The relativist might reply: "Okay, but relativity of truth to possible worlds is special. A real relativist is someone who takes propositional truth to be relative to some *other* parameter, in addition to possible worlds!" Alternatively: "A real relativist is someone who takes the *actual* truth of propositions to be relative to

[13] Bar-Hillel 1973: 304.

[14] See Cartwright 1962, reprinted in Cartwright 1987.

something" (where actual truth is truth in the actual world).[15] But this is really only a band-aid covering up a deeper problem. For some semanticists take circumstances of evaluation to include not just worlds, but other parameters, like times or "standards of precision." On the present proposal, they would count as relativists about truth, because they relativize propositional truth to parameters besides worlds. But in fact, they are not relativists in any interesting sense.

Consider first the relativization of propositional truth to times. Although the dominant view in the twentieth century has been that propositions do not vary in truth value across times of evaluation, in ancient and medieval logic, propositions were conceived as tensed, and as varying in truth value with time.[16] A few contemporary thinkers have taken the same view: most prominently, Arthur Prior and David Kaplan.[17] Their motivation is semantic: if the tenses are operators on propositions, they argue, propositional truth must be time-relative.[18] Critics have argued that tenses are not best conceived as operators on propositions (King, forthcoming) and that we must think of propositional truth as "eternal" if we are to make good sense of belief attributions (Richard 1980, Richard 1982).[19]

[15]Cf. Nozick 2001: "A set T of truths contains relative truths if the members of T are true and there is a factor F *other than the obvious ones* (the meaning of the utterance, the reference of some terms within it, and *the way the world is*), such that that factor F can vary, and when F is varied, the truth value (viz. truth or falsity) of the members of T varies" (19, emphasis added). Thus, Nozick excludes relativity to possible world by stipulation. He admits (and regrets) that he has no principled basis for demarcating "the harmless factors, relativity to which does not constitute relativism, from the factors that make for relativism" (307 n. 7).

[16]See the historical survey in Appendix A of Prior 1957.

[17]See Prior 1957, Prior 2003, Kaplan 1989: 502–509.

[18]Kaplan 1989: "If we built the time of evaluation into the contents (thus removing time from the circumstances leaving only, say, a possible world history, and making contents *specific* as to time), it would make no sense to have temporal operators. To put the point another way, if *what is said* is thought of as incorporating reference to a specific time, or state of the world, or whatever, it is otiose to ask whether what is said would have been true at another time, in another state of the world, or whatever. Temporal operators applied to eternal sentences (those whose contents incorporate a specific time of evaluation) are redundant" (503).

[19]I agree that there are good arguments against using *only* time-relative propositions in the theory of propositional attitudes. But it does not follow, as Richard seems to think, that we should use only eternal propositions. On my view, we need to individuate propositions in different ways for different purposes. For example, I believe that Kenneth Starr is alive, and I have believed this for years, despite the fact that Starr has not been in the news much lately. So what is it that I believe now and have believed for years? Not that Kenneth Starr is alive in March 2004—I didn't believe *that* last year. Rather, that Kenneth Starr is alive. But this is a time-relative proposition. In defense of the eternalist-only position, Salmon 2003:115–16 suggests that what I believed then and still believe now is that Kenneth Starr is alive throughout an interval of several years, which may be

It doesn't matter for our purposes who wins this debate; the point is that the issues are not issues about "relative truth," in any sense that could help with the problems we canvassed in section 1. For the parties to the debate can agree completely about which sentences are true at which contexts of use, and hence on which assertions count as "objectively correct." They disagree only about *the source* of a tensed sentence's context-sensitivity. Eternalists think that tensed sentences are context-sensitive because they express different (eternal) propositions at different contexts of use, while temporalists attribute their context-sensitivity to the temporal-relativity of the propositions they express.

It will promote clarity here if we keep in mind that there are two very different sources of contextual variation in truth value (which is what I will mean in this paper by *context-sensitivity*). The first and most obvious is indexicality. A sentence is *indexical* (as I use the term here) if it expresses different propositions at different contexts of use. But not all context-sensitivity can be traced to indexicality (including "hidden" indexicality not attributable to an expressed component of the sentence). The sentence "The number of AIDS babies born in the United States in 2003 is greater than ten thousand" is indexical-free, yet it is context-sensitive, because its truth varies with the *world* of utterance.[20] The source of its context-sensitivity comes out clearly if we define the truth of a sentence at a context of use in terms of the truth of the proposition that sentence expresses. We can then see that the context of use plays two distinct roles:

> SENTENCE TRUTH AT A CONTEXT: A sentence S is true at a context of use C just in case for some proposition p,
>
> (1) S expresses p at C and
>
> (2) p is true at all circumstances of evaluation compatible with C.

Contingent but indexical-free sentences are context-sensitive not because they express different propositions at different worlds of utterance—clause (1)—but because the propositions they express have different truth values relative to different worlds, and the context of use tells us which world to look at—clause (2). The debate between temporalists and eternalists concerns whether tense affects truth-conditions the way contingency does—via clause (2)—or the way standard index-

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vague in its exact boundaries (adapting his claim to my example; see also Richard 2003:38–42). I find this implausible, but I cannot go into the matter here.

[20] David Lewis put this point by saying that "[c]ontingency is a kind of indexicality" (Lewis 1980/1998: 25). Here Lewis is using "indexicality" for what I call "context-sensitivity."

icals do—via clause (1). But all parties can agree about which sentences are true at which contexts of use; they disagree only about the mechanism.

My formulation of clause (2) is a bit different from the one you will find in, for example, Kaplan 1989:

> If c is a context, then an occurrence of [a sentence] ϕ in c is true iff the content expressed by ϕ in this context is true when evaluated with respect to the circumstance of the context. (522, cf. the more formal version on 547).

Kaplan is entitled to talk of "*the* circumstance of the context," because his circumstances of evaluation are composed of a world and a time, and a context of use determines a unique world and time. But in the interest of full generality, we should not assume that context will always pick out a *unique* circumstance of evaluation. For example, in an indeterministic framework with overlapping worlds or "histories" the context of use will in general pick out a *class* of worlds or histories—those containing the utterance event. For this reason, I talk of "all circumstances of evaluation compatible with the context" rather than of "the circumstances of the context." What "compatibility" amounts to must be worked out in detail for each semantic theory.

Let me make a terminological suggestion that I hope will make things clearer. We are used to talking of sentence truth as relative to contexts, and of proposition truth as relative to circumstances of evaluation. But we can make good sense of proposition truth relative to contexts, as well. We define

> PROPOSITION TRUTH AT A CONTEXT: A proposition p is true at a context of use C iff p is true at all circumstances of evaluation compatible with C.

We can now rephrase our definition of sentence truth at a context as follows:

> SENTENCE TRUTH AT A CONTEXT: A sentence S is true at a context of use C just in case for some proposition p,
>
> (1) S expresses p at C and
>
> (2) p is true at C.

It may seem strange to talk of a proposition being true at a context of use, because a proposition (unlike a sentence) is not "used" (let alone "uttered"). But the notion

makes perfect sense: as we've just seen, we have good reason to keep track of the truth of propositions relative to contexts at which *sentences* might be used.[21]

The issue about whether propositional truth should be relativized to a standards-of-precision parameter is structurally much like the issue between temporalists and eternalists. As before, the motivation comes from the requirements of compositional semantics. If "strictly speaking" and "speaking loosely" are propositional operators, then circumstances of evaluation must include a parameter for these operators to shift. Or, to put the point another way, there must be a difference between the proposition that p and the proposition that *strictly speaking,* p, and there can only be such a difference if propositional truth is relativized to a standards of precision parameter. Of course, it is not at all clear that "strictly speaking" functions as a propositional operator, and not, say, a speech-act modifier. One might also wonder whether propositions whose truth values vary across standards of precision are appropriate objects of the attitudes.[22] But these are not questions about relative truth in the sense we are pursuing. For one who relativizes propositional truth to standards of precision can agree completely with one who does not about which sentences are true at which contexts of use. The issue between them concerns only whether this contextual variation is due to the fact that sentences express different propositions in different contexts (where different standards of precision are in play) or to the fact that the propositions they express have different truth values at different contexts.

In sum, those who relativize propositional truth to times or standards of precision need not be, and typically are not, relativists about truth in any interesting sense. For they can agree completely with those who do not relativize propositional truth to times or standards of precision on all questions about the truth of sentences at contexts of use, and so also about the objective correctness of assertions. Indeed, we could even relativize propositional truth to *ethical standards*—perhaps to accommodate propositional operators like "On any standard" or "For the Hopi"—without making any heterodox claims about the truth of sentences at different contexts of use, and without abandoning an "absolutist" position about the objective correctness of assertions. This relativization of propositional truth to ethical standards would be compatible with either a Harman-style "content rela-

[21] Even in the case of sentences, talk of S being true at context C carries no commitment to there being an actual *use* or *utterance* of S at C. See Kaplan 1989: 522.

[22] King, forthcoming, argues plausibly that they are: "To say that the object of one of my beliefs is the claim that France is hexagonal, and that whether what I believe is true or false depends not just on what the world is like, but also on how much precision we require seems completely unobjectionable" (57).

tivism" or a Falwell-style moral absolutism, depending on the story one told about which circumstances of evaluation are "compatible with" which contexts of use. (Falwell could say that the only circumstances of evaluation that are compatible with *any* context of use are circumstances whose "ethical standards" parameter accords with The One True God-Given Moral Law.) But neither of these views would be a relativism about truth, in the sense that concerns us.

So where does this leave us? Sentence truth is relative on everyone's view—to a context of use. Utterance or assertion truth is nonsensical if we're using "utterance" or "assertion" in the act sense, and if we're using them in the object sense, it reduces to sentence or proposition truth. But proposition truth is also relative, on nearly everyone's view, to circumstances of evaluation, which typically include possible worlds but may also include times, standards of precision, or other parameters. If we follow my terminological suggestion, we can also think of proposition truth as relative to contexts of use. But none of this amounts to relativism in any interesting sense. So how should a radical relativism about truth be stated?

Here is my proposal. We are already comfortable with the notion of a "context of use" or "context of utterance." So we ought to be able to make good sense of the notion of a "context of assessment": a concrete context in which a speech act (or other bearer of propositional content) is being *assessed*. There is nothing particularly controversial about this notion: even an arch anti-relativist ought to find it intelligible. My (controversial) suggestion is that we relativize truth for sentences and propositions to both a context of use and a context of assessment. Instead of truth at a context, we must now talk of truth at *contexts*:

> PROPOSITION TRUTH AT CONTEXTS: A proposition p is true at a context of use U and context of assessment A just in case it is true at all circumstances of evaluation compatible with U and A.
>
> SENTENCE TRUTH AT CONTEXTS: A sentence S is true at a context of use U and context of assessment A just in case for some proposition p,
>
> (1) S expresses p at U and A, and
>
> (2) p is true at U and A.

This move opens up room for a new kind of context-sensitivity. A sentence (or proposition) is context-sensitive in the usual sense, or *use-sensitive*, if its truth value varies with the context of use (keeping the context of assessment fixed).

A sentence (or proposition) is context-sensitive in the new way, or *assessment-sensitive*, if its truth value varies with the context of assessment (keeping the context of use fixed). We also get two kinds of indexicality. A sentence is *use-indexical* if the proposition it expresses varies with the context of use (keeping the context of assessment fixed), and *assessment-indexical* if the proposition it expresses varies with the context of assessment (keeping the context of use fixed).

Using these notions, we can give a succinct and general characterization of relativism about truth. To be a relativist about truth, in the most generic sense, is to hold that there is at least one assessment-sensitive sentence. Call this *sentence relativism.* (One gets further subspecies here by varying the domain of discourse: one assessment-sensitive sentence *in English?* In a possible human language? In an intelligibly describable language? Note that the first two versions are, in part, empirical theses.) There are two ways to be a sentence relativist. One can be a *propositional relativist* and hold that there is at least one assessment-sensitive proposition. Or one can be an *expressive relativist* and hold that there is at least one assessment-indexical sentence.[23]

My preferred version of relativism is propositional relativism. To make sense of expressive relativism, we would have to give up the view that there is always an "absolute" answer to the question what proposition a sentence expresses in a particular context of use. In some cases, we would have to maintain, a sentence in a context of use expresses one proposition relative to one assessor, and another, distinct proposition relative to another assessor. It is hard to know what to make of this, though perhaps one can approximate the force of asserting an assessment-indexical sentence by making one's speech act appropriately conditional: "If you are Jane, take me to be asserting that snow is white; if you are Fred, take me to be asserting that non-black things are non-ravens; etc." A relativist view along these lines would require substantial revision of existing theories of meaning. For example (as Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson have observed), we could no longer say, with Stalnaker 1978, that the effect of assertion is to add the proposition asserted to a "common ground" of presupposed propositions. For there may be no common fact of the matter about which proposition *was* asserted.[24]

One might suppose that propositional relativism would require drastic revisions in existing theories of propositions, but this is not the case. An example will help make this clear. One way to get a propositional relativism would be to

[23]Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson, forthcoming, also distinguish between expressive relativism and propositional relativism, calling them "content relativism" and "truth-value relativism."

[24]For more arguments against this kind of "content relativism," see Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson, forthcoming.

say that a proposition is true at U and A just in case it is true at the world of U and the standards of precision in play at A. (This would amount to saying that a circumstance of evaluation is "compatible with" contexts U and A just in case its world parameter matches the world of U and its standards of precision parameter matches the standards of precision in play at A.) On this view, the proposition I express by uttering "#2 toggle bolts are one inch long" could be true as assessed from a context with low standards of precision and false as assessed from a context with high standards of precision.[25] Notice, however, that this relativist view shares a theory of propositions with the kind of non-relativist view one can find in Kompa 2002 and King, forthcoming. Both the relativist and the non-relativist agree that propositional truth is relative to two parameters, worlds and standards of precision. They disagree only about how to define propositional truth at a context of use (and context of assessment) in terms of propositional truth at a circumstance of evaluation. The non-relativist version says that a proposition is true at U (and, harmlessly, A) just in case it is true at the world of U and the standards of precision in play at U, while the relativist version says that a proposition is true at U and A just in case it is true at the world of U and the standards of precision in play at A.[26]

The real problem with propositional relativism is not the background theory of propositions it presupposes. The real problem is making sense of the locution "proposition p is true at context of use U and context of assessment A." What on earth does that mean? Let us now turn to that question.

3 Making sense of relative truth

One might at first wonder what the problem is. After all, we have already given a *definition* of "p is true at context of use U and context of assessment A" (page 13, above). This definition is schematic, because we haven't defined "compatible with." But it will be no trouble to do this once we know more about the fine structure of circumstances of evaluation (which will depend in turn on what propositional operators our target language contains). When we have fleshed out the definition in this way, it will settle which propositions are true at which contexts

[25] I am not defending this kind of relativism, which I don't find particularly plausible. I am merely using it as an example.

[26] If we assume the schematic definition of propositional truth at contexts, above, then this disagreement amounts to a disagreement about which circumstances of evaluation are "compatible" with which contexts of use and assessment.

of use and contexts of assessment.

But although we have a definition, there is a sense in which we still do not know what we are talking about when we talk of a proposition being true relative to a context of use and a context of assessment. For we don't understand the significance of this talk: what it is *for*. As Dummett observes in his classic article "Truth" (Dummett 1959), one could in principle learn which positions in chess and other games were "winning" without having any understanding of the *significance* of winning. (Here it helps to imagine intelligent Martian observers who can follow the rules of games but fail to see that one is supposed to try to win.) Similarly, Dummett argues, one can have a correct account of which sentences are true—for example, a Tarskian truth theory—without understanding the significance of saying that a sentence is true. To understand that, Dummett claims, one needs to see the role truth plays in our practice of assertion: just as it is part of the concept of winning that winning is our aim in playing games, so "…it is part of the concept of truth that we aim at making true statements …" (Dummett 1959/1978:2).

As it stands, this claim is pretty obscure. It's certainly not the case that we always do aim at making true statements or winning a game. Sometimes we lie, and sometimes we play to lose. Nor is it the case that we always *ought* (all things considered) to aim at making true statements, or at winning. Sometimes we *ought* to lie—when the murderer is at the door, for example—and sometimes we ought to throw the game—to keep a kid interested, for example. We might claim that we ought, *qua asserters or game players*, to aim at speaking truth or at winning, while allowing that in special cases, these obligations can conflict with general moral or prudential obligations that outweigh them. Or we might claim that one is entitled to presume, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that an asserter intends to assert the truth.[27]

However the claim that assertion aims at truth is understood, though, it does not bode well for the intelligibility of relative truth. It does not make sense to aim to assert a proposition that is true at the context of use and the context of assessment, for there is no such thing as "the" context of assessment. Each assertion can be assessed from indefinitely many distinct contexts. In a relative-truth framework, then, aiming at truth is a bit like aiming to walk farther away—not farther away from you, or from here, but just farther away *simpliciter*. It doesn't make sense.

The usual relativist gambit at this point is to say: what you should aim at in

[27] See Burge 1993.

making assertions is to assert a proposition that is true relative to the context of use and your own *current* context of assessment (which will of course be identical with the context of use).[28] But this only gives a significance to "true at U and A" for the special case where $U = A$. The relativist has not told us what to do with "true at U, A" where U and A are distinct. As a result, the anti-relativist might justly charge that the relativist's "true at C, C" is just a notational variant of her own "true at C," and that the general two-place relation "true at U, A" has not yet been given a significance.

In my view, the relativist should instead reject the whole idea of understanding truth in terms of "the aim of assertion." Indeed, there are independent reasons for rejecting this idea, and even Dummett came to regret the stress he had placed on it in "Truth." As he notes in the 1972 Postscript, it would be 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 (1978: 20). Even if truth is an internal aim of assertion, it is certainly not the only such aim. It is part of being a good asserter that one assert only that for which one has good evidence, and only that which is relevant to the conversation at hand. When we criticize people's assertions as defective, it is as often for failures of evidence or relevance as for failures of truth. Nor do we give credit for unjustified assertions that happen (by sheer luck) to be true, or for irrelevant but true assertions. Thus I do not think we are likely to find much illumination in the idea that truth is the internal aim of assertion, and we should not regard relativism's incompatibility with it as a serious problem.

We do owe a replacement, however. And, although I think Dummett's talk of truth as the aim of assertion was misguided, I think his fundamental suggestion 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 1978: 20) was on the right track. So what role *does* truth play in our practice of assertion? One plausible and widely accepted idea is that an assertion is a *commitment* to the truth of what is asserted.[29] To make an assertion—even an insincere or otherwise defective one—is, *inter alia*, to commit oneself to the truth of the proposition asserted (relative to its context of use).[30] But what is it to commit oneself to the truth of a proposition? What exactly is one committed to *doing*? The most illuminating answer I have seen is Robert

[28] See Kölbel 2002: 125, Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson, forthcoming; 29.

[29] See e.g. Searle 1979: 12.

[30] *Inter alia*, because presumably asserting a sentence involves more than simply committing oneself to its truth. Plausibly, the commitment must be undertaken publicly, by means of an overt utterance; perhaps there are other conditions as well.

Brandom's:[31] On Brandom's account, the commitment one undertakes in making an assertion is a "conditional task-responsibility" to vindicate one's claim when it is challenged (either by argument or by deferring to someone else's assertion), and to withdraw the assertion if the challenge cannot be met.[32] More formally:

> ASSERTORIC COMMITMENT: In asserting that p at a context U, one commits oneself to providing adequate grounds for the truth of p (relative to U), in response to any appropriate challenge, or (when appropriate) to deferring this responsibility to another asserter on whose testimony one is relying. One can be released from this commitment only by withdrawing the assertion.[33]

If this account is along the right lines, then we can think of truth as the property you are committed to showing asserted propositions to have had, when your assertions are challenged. While this does not sound as snappy as "truth is the aim of assertion," I think it is significantly clearer and more defensible. More to our purpose here, it leaves room for relative truth. For whenever an assertion is challenged, there are two relevant contexts: the context in which the assertion was made and the context in which it is being challenged. A natural way to give a significance to doubly context-relative truth would be to say that it is truth relative to the original context of utterance and the asserter's *current* context of assessment (at the time of the challenge) that must be established when an assertion is challenged:

> ASSERTORIC COMMITMENT (DUAL CONTEXTS): In asserting that p at a context U, one commits oneself to providing adequate grounds for

[31] Brandom 1983, Brandom 1994:ch. 3. I should warn the reader that there are significant differences between Brandom's way of developing these ideas and my own, in part due to the very different uses to which we are putting them.

[32] There may be no specific sanction for failing to follow through on this commitment. But if I fail too blatantly or too frequently, others may stop treating me as a being that is capable of undertaking this kind of commitment. They may still take my utterances as expressions of my beliefs, as we take a dog's excited tail wagging as an expression of its psychological state. They may even regard my utterances, if found to be reliable, as useful bits of information. But they will be treating me as a measuring instrument, not as an asserter. They will not take me to be *committing myself* to the truth of my utterances.

[33] The principle is schematic along many dimensions: to make it less schematic, one would have to say something about what kinds of challenges count as "appropriate," what grounds count as "adequate" responses to challenges, and when it is appropriate to defer responsibility. I won't attempt to do any of this here. Note also that Brandom would not formulate the principle in terms of truth: he is committed to giving an account of assertion that does not appeal to the notion of truth.

> the truth of p (relative to U *and one's current context of assessment*), in response to any appropriate challenge, or (when appropriate) to deferring this responsibility to another asserter on whose testimony one is relying. One can be released from this commitment only by withdrawing the assertion. (additions emphasized)

Note that although this account assumes that it makes sense to talk about contexts of assessment, it does not assume that propositional truth actually *varies* with the context of assessment. So non-relativists could accept it, though for them the mention of "one's current context of assessment" would be an idle wheel. What we have, then, is a plausible story about the role of truth in our practice of assertion that gives a significance to talk of truth relative to a context of assessment, without prejudging the question whether we can actually assert anything whose truth is relative in this way. Indeed, this account gives us a way to test particular semantic hypotheses that make use of relative truth, by settling the *normative* consequences of these hypotheses. (We must still make a jump from behavior—our actual practices in challenging, defending, and withdrawing assertions—to norms, but that is a jump we must make elsewhere as well.)

I want to close with a problem that used to bother me, and perhaps still should. Although we found no strong sense in which assertion aims at truth, the claim that *belief* aims at truth is much more plausible. Indeed, as Bernard Williams (1973) argued, truth seems to be the aim of belief in the very strong sense that a propositional attitude that did not "aim at truth" would not *be* a belief. Now, here's the problem. We generally assume that any proposition that can be asserted can also be believed. It would certainly be odd if this were not the case! So, if we can assert propositions whose truth varies with the context of assessment, presumably we can believe them, too. But how is that possible if belief "aims at truth"? How can belief aim at truth if the believed proposition lacks an absolute truth value? Presumably we cannot solve this problem the way we solved the corresponding problem about assertion—by rejecting the claim that belief aims at truth. For that claim is not independently problematic, the way the analogous claim about assertion is. Moreover, there is no analogue for belief to our challenge-and-response story about assertion. (Believing is not an action, so it does not involve the undertaking of commitments to justify; nor are beliefs the sort of thing one can "take back" or "withdraw" at will, as one can withdraw assertions.) So does relativism founder when we consider the contents of attitudes, as well as assertions?

Let me say how I am now tempted to resolve the problem—though I am by no means convinced that this is the right way, or even that the problem can be

resolved. To say that belief aims at truth, I would suggest, is to say that it aims at truth relative to the believer's current context of assessment.[34] But because beliefs are not punctate events (like assertions), but continuous states, the believer's current context of assessment will also be the context of use. Thus a belief in context C succeeds in its aim if its propositional content is true relative to context of use C and context of assessment C.

You may recall that we rejected a similar proposal about assertion, on the grounds that it left the significance of "true at U, A" obscure where $U \neq A$. Our solution was to reject the idea that truth is the internal aim of assertion. But we do not want to reject the idea that truth is the internal aim of belief. So aren't we stuck with the same problem?

No—because although we are accepting that truth is the aim of belief, we need not say that (doubly contextualized) truth gets its *significance* through its relation to belief. We can continue to say (with Dummett) that what gives the notion of truth its significance is the role it plays in the practice of assertion—a role which *does* leave room for relativity to a context of assessment. I think this is an interesting and surprising result. What makes relative truth intelligible is the potential difference between the context at which an assertion is made and the contexts at which challenges to it will have to be met. Thus, even though assessment-relative propositions can be believed, judged, doubted, supposed, and so on, there would be no theoretical need for relative truth if we did not make assertions.

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[34] Of course, as Wedgwood 2002 reminds us, beliefs don't literally "aim at" anything. For attempts to unpack the metaphor, see Velleman 2000 and Wedgwood 2002.

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