

# Relative Truth

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## 1 Introduction: Traditional and Contemporary Relativism

The recent history of the word ‘relativism’ is both interesting and confusing. Throughout its history, the term has been used to denote many philosophical positions, but a fairly radical transition happened at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will start by describing this change. We will label the earlier use ‘Traditional Relativism’ and the later use ‘Contemporary Relativism.’ Our primary focus here will be on Contemporary Relativism, but first we offer a brief introduction to Traditional Relativism and how it differs from the Contemporary Relativism.

*Traditional Relativism:* In Plato’s dialogue *Theaetetus*, Socrates discusses Protagoras’ statement, ‘Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not’ (*Theaetetus*, 152a). This statement has traditionally been read as expressing a relativist position.<sup>1</sup> In philosophy of science, Paul Feyerabend’s (1975) slogan ‘anything goes’ can be seen as leading to a form of relativism. Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) views about scientific progress have also been described as having relativist implications.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Burnyeat (1976).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Shapere (1964).

The way ‘relativism’ is used in moral philosophy is particularly interesting for our purposes. In a much-cited 1975 paper, Gilbert Harman defends a version of moral relativism that he describes as follows:

My moral relativism is a soberly logical thesis – a thesis about logical form, if you like. Just as the judgment that something is large makes sense only in relation to one or another comparison class, so too, I will argue, the judgment that it is wrong of someone to do something makes sense only in relation to an agreement or understanding. (Harman 1975, p. 3)<sup>3</sup>

It is unclear what, if anything, Protagoras, Feyerabend, Kuhn, and Harman have in common, and we will not try to answer that question here. What we want to highlight is that a development occurred just around the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Prior to this development, it would be utterly uncontroversial to apply the term ‘relativism’ to the kind of view Harman describes in the passage above. After this development, a new usage emerged according to which Harman’s view does not count as a form of ‘relativism’. The view described by Harman is in effect treated as one of the central opponents of or alternatives to relativism.

Let us start with some observations about Harman’s way of using the term ‘relativism’. If ‘relativism’ is used as Harman does in this passage, then those who think that ‘A is tall’ means the same as a sentence of the form ‘A is tall for an F’, are relativists about tallness.<sup>4</sup> On that construal, relativism is a plausible position not just about gradable adjectives, but also about expressions like ‘far away’ and ‘3pm’. In all these cases, a case can be made that the content of the sentences (e.g. ‘Sam is tall’, ‘Sam is far away’ and ‘It is 3pm’) include a relation to something (a comparison class, a location, and a time zone). Harman’s claim in the above passage is that moral relativism should be understood in the same way. It is therefore

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. also Harman and Thomson (1996).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Richard (2004, 2008) for a discussion of comparative adjectives in connection with Contemporary Relativism.

natural to read Harman as making the claim that ‘It is wrong to F’ means the same, roughly, as ‘It is wrong to F according to agreement A’.<sup>5</sup>

When the term ‘relativism’ is used in Harman’s way, there is one important and salient implication. It seems that Nora can assert (1) Jasmine can assert (2) without disagreement.

(1) It is wrong to steal.

(2) It is not wrong to steal.

If the sentence uttered by Nora has the content that it is wrong to steal according to one agreement and the sentence uttered by Jasmine has the content that it is not wrong to steal according to a different agreement, they can both be right and they can agree with each other.

In a recent book, David Velleman is arguably even more explicit than Harman when it comes to using ‘relativism’ in this way. While describing the view that he calls ‘relativism’, he comments on some of the implications of relativism.

This claim implies that when the Kikuyu say that there isn’t anything wrong with female circumcision and the Mbuti say there is, both may be speaking the truth, because one group is speaking of what’s wrong-for-the-Kikuyu while the other is speaking of what’s wrong-for-the-Mbuti. Of the course, the Kikuyu and the Mbuti have a practical disagreement: they disagree over how to treat young women. According to moral relativism, however, there is no proposition whose truth is at issue between them. (Velleman 2013, p. 46)

He goes on to offer the following elaboration:

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<sup>5</sup> There are some subtle questions about how to interpret Harman’s views. For instance, Harman emphasises that he is not making a claim about what people mean in the sense that they intend to make an elliptical claim. See e.g. Harman and Thomson (1996, p. 4-5).

What members of the community say, however, is simply that A is wrong, a statement that is normatively valenced. The latter should be interpreted as containing an implicit indexical, as in ‘wrong-for-us’, the reference of ‘us’ being supplied by the context of utterance, so that the statement expresses the fact that A is wrong for members of that community [...]. (Velleman 2013, p. 47)

According to the view that Velleman is describing, if Nora asserts (1) and Jasmine asserts (2), they might very well be expressing compatible propositions. Let us suppose that Nora and Jasmine are members of different communities. In that case, Nora is talking about wrongness-for-members-of-Nora’s community and Jasmine is talking about wrongness-for-members-of-Jasmine’s community. That means that there is no conflict between the proposition expressed by (1) and (2).

*From Traditional to Contemporary Relativism:* In order to understand the contemporary debate about relativism, it is extremely important to note that, in recent years, a new use of ‘relativism’ has emerged. According to this new usage, the views discussed by Harman and Velleman do not count as forms of relativism. Another term – ‘contextualism’ – was introduced to describe their views. In the ensuing debate, contextualism was typically construed as the central opponent of relativism. So the term ‘relativism’ has had a strange and confusing destiny indeed.<sup>6</sup>

Our focus in what follows will be on this more recent usage. According to this use of ‘relativism’, the views discussed by Harman and Velleman do not count as relativist views. In section 2 we present Contemporary Relativism in more detail and describe some of the

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<sup>6</sup> More generally, the change in usage of ‘relativism’ is an excellent case study in how not to develop theoretical vocabulary. Using a term to first denote a theory and then later using the same term to denote another theory that entails the negation of the first theory is something that an intellectual discipline should try hard to avoid.

different versions of the view. In section 3 we look at some applications of Contemporary Relativism. In section 4 we talk about the way that Contemporary Relativism is motivated. In section 5 we discuss various objections to Contemporary Relativism.

## **2 Contemporary Relativism: Relative Truth**

The focus of this article is going to be on the kind of Contemporary Relativist views that are exemplified by the works of, among others, Andy Egan (2007, 2010), Max Kölbel (2002), Peter Laserson (2005), John MacFarlane (2005b, 2014), Mark Richard (2004, 2008), and Tamina Stephenson (2007). The relativist views in question have for the most part been developed in an effort to make sense of certain areas of discourse, such as discourse about matters of taste. This form of relativism (from now on we will use ‘relativism’ to denote this contemporary version) is often presented as an improvement over more traditional views about the semantics of the relevant natural language expressions. In particular, it is often claimed to have important advantages when compared to so-called ‘contextualist’ views. It is therefore useful to introduce relativism by comparing it to contextualism.

According to a contextualist view, sentences that contain the relevant expressions have different contents or express different propositions in different contexts. This is the standard way to think about sentences that contain indexicals like ‘I’ and ‘here’. A sentence like (3) expresses different propositions in different contexts depending on who the agent or speaker of the context is.

(3) I am hungry.

However, the idea can be extended to a wide range of expressions. For instance, let us consider a simple contextualist view about predicates of taste, such as ‘tasty’. The basic idea is that a sentence like (4) can express different propositions in different contexts, depending on the relevant standards of taste.

(4) Haggis is tasty.

In one context, it might be that it is Nora's standards that are relevant, while in a different context, what is relevant might be Jasmine's standards. In the former case, the proposition expressed would be the proposition that haggis is tasty relative to Nora's standards. In the latter case, it would be the proposition that haggis is tasty relative to Jasmine's standards. Given the traditional use of 'relativism', this view would be labelled 'relativist' and given the contemporary use we are focusing on it would be called 'contextualist'. Since we are interested in Contemporary Relativism, we will use the term 'contextualism' for views like this.

According to contextualists, sentences can have different truth-values relative to different contexts of use in virtue of expressing different propositions. According to a relativist view, there is a more interesting sense in which truth is relative. In order to understand the relativist views that we are going to focus on, it is useful to consider two questions:

- What are the bearers of relative truth and falsity?
- What is truth relative to?

Let us suppose that the relevant bearers of truth and falsity are propositions. Applied to predicates of taste, the relativist idea is that sentences like (4) do not express different propositions in different contexts. Instead they express propositions that vary in truth-value. For instance, the relevant proposition might be true relative to Nora's standards of taste, but false relative to Jasmine's standards of taste.

However, it is worth emphasising that it is not enough to say that relativism is the view that propositional truth is relative. For instance, it is a common view that propositions are true or

false relative to possible worlds, but Contemporary Relativists are usually seen as making a more controversial claim.<sup>7</sup> The upshot is that it also matters what truth is relative to. But, as will become clear below, here there is a significant amount of variation between different relativist views.

Since different relativists have proposed different ways of developing and implementing their views, we will look at some of the more prominent proposals in the literature. We are going to focus on the different versions of relativism defended by Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2005b, 2014), and Egan (2007). These views are similar in that they agree that there is an interesting sense in which truth is relative. They allow that it is propositional truth, and not just the truth of sentences, that is relative. In that respect they differ from the contextualist views described above.

But there are also differences between the relativist views. The most salient difference is arguably that relativists have different views about what propositions are true or false relative to. Lasersohn and Egan claim that propositions are true or false relative to individuals. But according to MacFarlane, it is only if propositions are true or false relative to a contexts of assessment that we get a genuine relativist view.<sup>8</sup> A more subtle difference is that the different authors emphasise different sources of inspiration for their relativist views. For instance, while Lasersohn's implementation of relativism is based on the semantic system developed by David Kaplan (1989), Egan's version of relativism draws inspiration from David Lewis' (1980) account of de se attitudes.

## **2.1 Lasersohn: Context and Circumstance**

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, ch. 1) for further discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Other relativists have different views on this matter. For instance, according to Kölbel's (2002) version of relativism, propositions are true or false relative to perspectives. It is an open question how deep some of these differences really are.

In order to implement their ideas, some relativists have drawn inspiration from the semantic system developed by Kaplan (1989). According to Kaplan, an expression is associated with two kinds of meaning. The first kind of meaning is the content. It can be represented as a function from circumstances of evaluation to extensions. In the case of a sentence, its extension is a truth-value. The second kind of meaning is the character. It determines the content relative to a context and can be represented as a function from contexts to contents. In the case of indexicals like 'I' and 'here', the character is a non-constant function. It determines different contents relative to different contexts.

For present purposes, what is important is that in this system, the truth-value of a sentence can depend on both the context insofar as it plays a role in determining the content and the circumstance of evaluation with respect to which it is evaluated. In Kaplan's original system, circumstances of evaluation are treated as world-time pairs. That means that the content of a sentence can vary in truth-value across worlds and times. However, relativists have suggested including other parameters alongside the world and the time parameter. Lasersohn argues that this allows relativists to implement their views by making a small adjustment to Kaplan's system.

All we have to do is assign words like *fun* and *tasty* the same content relative to different individuals, but contextually relativize the assignment of truth values to contents, so that the same content may be assigned different truth values relative to different individuals. This allows for the possibility that two utterances express identical semantic content, but with one of them true and the other one false.

This is not at all hard to work out formally, and in fact can be implemented in Kaplan's system with a relatively small adjustment. (Lasersohn 2005, p. 662)



Lasersohn's proposed adjustment amounts to treating circumstances of evaluation as world-time-individual triples rather than world time-pairs. This makes it possible for the content of a sentence to have different truth-values relative to different individuals or 'judges', as he puts it. For instance, if we were to follow Lasersohn and apply this to predicates of taste, the content of (4) could be true relative to Nora and false relative to Jasmine.

(4) Haggis is tasty.

However, it is worth noting that while Lasersohn's specific proposal is to add an individual parameter to the circumstance of evaluation, the basic idea can be generalised. For instance, instead of contents being true or false relative to individuals, they could be true or false relative to standards of taste. Other parameters can also be introduced to handle other expressions. The more general idea is to add an additional parameter to the circumstance of evaluation.

This way of implementing relativism also makes it easy to state the difference between contextualist and relativist views. According to a traditional contextualist theory, the characters of the relevant expressions will be non-constant functions, just like the character of 'I' or 'now'. They will have different contents in different contexts. However, according to the relativist theory, it is not the contents of the sentences that vary, but the truth-values of the contents.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> While this looks like a straightforward way of implementing the relativist ideas, we have not said much about the role played by Kaplan's (1989) notion of content. This raises certain questions. It is for instance worth taking into account Lewis' (1980) distinction between the semantic value and the propositional content of a sentence. In a compositional semantic theory, the semantic values of complex expressions are determined by the semantic values of its parts and the way they are combined. It is tempting to identify the semantic value of a sentence with its propositional content, with the propositional content playing the role as the objects of speech acts and propositional attitudes. However, Lewis argued that there are good reasons to keep these notions apart. Dummett (1991 p. 48) draws a similar distinction between ingredient sense and assertoric content. For the purpose of the present discussion, we will assume that relativists are making a claim about propositional content and that we can talk about propositions and contents more or less interchangeably. But insofar as we want to

## 2.2 MacFarlane: Assessment Sensitivity

A closely related and prominent version of relativism, developed by MacFarlane (2005b, 2014), is based on the notion of assessment-sensitivity. The idea that sentences are true or false relative to context of use should already be familiar. This is the kind of context-dependence we find in cases involving indexicals like ‘I’ and ‘here’. But according to MacFarlane, we need, not just a context of use, but also contexts of assessment. A context of assessment is a context in which the use of a sentence is assessed (MacFarlane 2005b, p. 325). The idea is that the truth-value of a sentence or a proposition can depend, not just on the context of use, but also on the context of assessment. A sentence or proposition that has different truth-values relative to different contexts of assessment is assessment-sensitive.

Assessment-sensitivity allows us to say that a sentence or proposition is true as assessed by one individual, but false as assessed by another. For instance, if Nora were to assert (4), the sentence could still be true relative to Nora’s context of assessment, but false relative to Jasmine’s context of assessment.<sup>10</sup>

(4) Haggis is tasty.

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distinguish between the semantic value and the proposition content of a sentence, it is an interesting question whether this claim also goes together with a claim about the semantic value.

<sup>10</sup> The official statement of relativism that is given by MacFarlane (2005b, p. 328) is that there is at least one assessment-sensitive sentence. According to this approach, what is crucial to relativism is not the idea that propositional truth is relative, but the idea that truth is relative to contexts of assessment. Having said that, his preferred version of relativism still amounts to a view about propositional truth. Following Kaplan (1989), MacFarlane takes propositions to be true or false relative to circumstances of evaluation. That means that the context of assessment can play a role in determining the truth-value of a sentence by playing a role in determining the proposition expressed or by playing a role in determining the relevant circumstance of evaluation. It is the latter role that MacFarlane focuses on. For instance, we can suppose that circumstances of evaluation consist of a world determined by the context of use and a standard of taste determined by the context of assessment. In that case, we can say that the proposition expressed by (4) is true relative to the world of the context of use and Nora’s context of assessment, but false relative to the world of the context of use and Jasmine’s context of assessment. That means that (4) is assessment-sensitive, but only in virtue of expressing an assessment-sensitive proposition. See e.g. also MacFarlane (2014, ch. 3) for relevant discussion.

MacFarlane's preferred version of relativism differs from a traditional contextualist view in two ways. The first point is that the variation in truth-value is not a matter of different propositions being expressed in different contexts. The second point is that it is the context of assessment, not the context of use, which is relevant.

MacFarlane's distinction between contexts of use and contexts of assessment also allows us to recognise two positions that might not otherwise be salient: content relativism and nonindexical contextualism.

*Content Relativism:* While MacFarlane's focuses on the role that the context of assessment plays in determining the circumstance of evaluation, it is also possible to develop a view according to which the context of assessment plays a role in determining the proposition expressed. Brian Weatherson (2009) calls this view 'indexical relativism' and argues that it can be used to give a better theory of indicative conditionals. Herman Cappelen (2008a, 2008b) has explored a similar view that he calls 'content relativism'. For the purpose of the present discussion, we will ignore these views and focus on relativism as a view about propositional truth.

*Nonindexical Contextualism:* MacFarlane (2009) also distinguishes between relativism and another view that he calls 'nonindexical contextualism'. Relativists and nonindexical contextualists agree that propositional truth is relative. The difference comes down to whether the relevant parameters of the circumstance of evaluation are determined by the context of use or the context of assessment. According to relativism, the relevant parameters are determined by the context of assessment. According to nonindexical contextualism, the relevant parameters are determined by the context of use. For instance, the world parameter would be treated along nonindexical contextualist lines rather than relativist lines.

How should we understand the relationship between MacFarlane's version of relativism and the view defended by Lasersohn (2005)? MacFarlane differs from Lasersohn insofar as he makes a point of distinguishing between the parameters of the circumstance of evaluation that are determined by the context of use and the parameters that are determined by the context of assessment. If we look at how Lasersohn (2005, p. 666) defines truth for sentences in context, it is tempting to think of his view as a version of nonindexical contextualism. However, Lasersohn also makes some comments that indicate that it is not quite as simple as that and he makes a point of insisting that the individual or 'judge' parameter is not uniquely determined by objective features of the utterance situation.

If we claim that it is always possible to determine on an objective basis who the judge is, we effectively introduce into our system a level at which truth values are always assigned objectively. [...] In order to maintain an authentically subjective assignment of truth values to sentences containing predicates of personal taste, we must allow that the objective facts of the situation of utterance do not uniquely determine a judge. (Lasersohn 2005, p. 668-669, see also Lasersohn 2009, p. 363)

In this way, the individual or 'judge' parameter differs from the world and time parameters.<sup>11</sup> In any case, it is not the purpose of the present discussion to settle what it takes for a view to count as 'genuinely relativist'. The point is to highlight some of the differences and similarities between different versions of relativism.

### **2.3 Egan: Centred Worlds**

Egan (2007, 2010) has developed a version of relativism that draws inspiration from elements of Lewis' (1979) theory of *de se* attitudes. According to Lewis, the objects of beliefs and desires are not sets of possible worlds, but properties or sets of centered worlds, sets of world-time-individual triples. The basic idea is that if I have the first-person (what Lewis calls 'de

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<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Lasersohn (2013) for further relevant discussion.

se') belief that I am hungry, I am self-ascribing the property of being hungry.<sup>12</sup> For present purposes, it will be convenient to assume that it does not matter whether we talk about properties or sets of centered worlds. Insofar as they are meant to play the role of objects of beliefs and desires, let us use Egan's (2007, 2010) terminology and call them 'self-locating contents' and let us talk interchangeably about believing and self-ascribing self-locating contents.

Lewis originally put forward his theory as a solution to problems involving de se thought, but his theory has also become an inspiration for relativists like Egan. This kind of proposal is similar to Lasersohn's (2005) proposal insofar as it posits contents or propositions that vary in truth-value across individuals. Lasersohn (2009, p. 373) also recognises the similarity between his relativist theory and Lewis' (1979) theory of de se attitudes. It is nevertheless interesting to see the role that self-locating contents play in Egan's version of relativism, especially the role they play in his account of assertion.

Whereas Lewis was mainly interested in the contents of mental states, such as beliefs and desires, Egan (2007, 2010) emphasises the role of self-locating contents as the objects of assertions. The picture of assertion that Egan is working with is more or less that of Robert Stalnaker (1978). The idea is that accepting an assertion requires believing its content. In order to see how this is supposed to work, let us suppose that Nora asserts (4).

(4) Haggis is tasty.

Following Egan (2010), let us further suppose that that the object of her assertion is a self-locating content, something like the property of being disposed to enjoy haggis. In order for Jasmine to accept her assertion, she must then self-ascribe that property.

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Cappelen and Dever (2013) for critical discussion of Lewis' (1979) theory of de se attitudes.

It is important that Jasmine self-ascribes the property of being disposed to enjoy haggis and that she does not just ascribe this property to Nora. This is an important part of how the theory handles acceptance and disputes. Egan wants Jasmine to accept Nora's assertion only if she takes herself to be disposed to enjoy haggis. It is not enough that he believes that Nora is disposed to enjoy haggis. We will return to some related issues concerning disagreement in section 4.2 and section 5.2.

It is also important that the object of the assertion is not the property of being such that Nora is disposed to enjoy haggis. In that case, the truth-value would not vary across different individuals in the same world and we would again fail to predict the desired patterns of acceptance among speakers. This would be more in line with what we should expect from a contextualist theory.

In order to further appreciate this point, it is also useful to look at how Egan wants to treat sentences that involve first-person indexicals like 'I'. He argues that 'the very first place in which one might be inclined to look for self-locating content in natural language – sentences involving first-person indexicals – is not in fact a good place to look' (Egan 2010, p. 279). In order to see why, let us suppose that Nora asserts (3).

(3) I am hungry.

If the object of her assertion were the property of being hungry, as one might expect, Jasmine would have to self-ascribe the property of being hungry in order to accept her assertion. But that is not right. What she should come to believe is that Nora is hungry, not that she is hungry. In order to avoid this unfortunate result, Egan argues that we should accept a standard

theory of indexicals like 'I' according to which they refer to different individuals in different contexts.<sup>13</sup>

### **3 Relativist Hunting Grounds: Applications of Relativism**

Contemporary Relativists like Lasersohn, MacFarlane and Egan are not global relativists. Their relativist views are reserved for restricted domains of discourse. A significant part of the recent literature has focused on two domains: personal taste and epistemic modality. But the relativist project is on-going and a number of different applications have been proposed and it is likely that more will emerge in the future.

*Predicates of Taste:* So-called 'predicates of personal taste', or just 'predicates of taste', are among the expressions that have received a lot of attention in the debate about relativism. Several relativists, including Kölbel (2002, 2009), Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2007), Stephenson (2007), and Egan (2010), have argued that predicates of taste ought to be given a relativist treatment.

*Epistemic Modals:* Epistemic modals are another class of expressions that is frequently discussed in connection with relativism. MacFarlane (2011, p. 144) describes epistemic modals as epistemic uses of modal expressions like 'might', 'must', 'possibly', 'probably', and so forth. Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson (2005), Egan (2007), Stephenson (2007), and MacFarlane (2011) have all defended a relativist view about epistemic modals. It is natural to think of epistemic modals as being somehow dependent on a relevant body of information or knowledge. Relativism allows us to capture this by saying that sentences that contain epistemic modals express propositions that have different truth-values relative to different

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that according to Egan, while there is a difference between sentences involving predicates of taste and sentences involving first-person indexicals like 'I', there is no corresponding difference at the level of thought. The content of my belief that haggis is tasty and the content of my belief that I am hungry both have different truth-values relative to different individuals. This suggests that insofar as there is something special about sentences involving predicates of taste, at least as compared to sentences involving first-person indexicals, we should look for evidence of this at the level of language.

bodies of knowledge or information. According to MacFarlane (2011), this can be implemented by taking sentences like (5) to express assessment-sensitive propositions.

(5) Harry might be in Boston.

For instance, it could be that the proposition that Harry is in Boston is compatible with what Nora knows, whereas Jasmine knows that Harry is not in Boston. That could make it the case that the proposition expressed by (5) is true relative to Nora's context of assessment, but false relative to Jasmine's context of assessment.

*Other Applications:* While predicates of taste and epistemic modals have received a lot of attention, relativism has a number of other potential applications. Here we will only briefly mention some of them. For instance, in addition to being interested in epistemic modals, relativists have also taken an interest in problems involving so-called 'deontic modals'. Deontic modals are deontic uses of modals like 'may', 'ought', and 'must'. Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane (2010) suggest that deontic modals, like epistemic modals, are sensitive to an information state and that this should be cashed out in relativist terms.

Relativism has also been proposed as a way of dealing with knowledge ascriptions. Knowledge ascriptions have been the subject of much debate and a number of views have been proposed, including contextualist views.<sup>14</sup> Relativists like Richard (2004, 2008) and MacFarlane (2005a) have argued that relativism is an improvement over the other views in the debate. In particular, relativism avoids some of the problems with contextualist views.

MacFarlane (2003, 2008) has also argued that a relativist view can provide an account of so-called 'future contingents', contingent claims about the open future. For instance, let us

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<sup>14</sup> Contextualism about knowledge ascriptions has been defended by e.g. Cohen (1988, 1999), DeRose (1992, 2009), and Lewis (1996).



consider a sentence like ‘There will be a sea battle tomorrow’. If the future is genuinely ‘open’, it is unclear what we should say about the truth-value of a sentence like this. MacFarlane argues that relativism allows us to respect the idea that the future is genuinely open without saying that our talk about the open future is systematically confused.

#### **4 Why Relativism? The Central Motivations**

While the different applications of relativism might seem diverse, there are certain themes that are common, even if not universal. In what follows we are going to elaborate on the role that subjectivity and disagreement play in motivating relativism.

##### **4.1 Subjectivity**

There seems to be an element of subjectivity in many of the areas of discourse for which a relativist treatment has been proposed. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of predicates of taste, but it is also relevant in the case of other areas, such as epistemic modals. Kölbel emphasises the importance of being able to make sense of non-objective matters.

Arguably, not all natural-language sentences concern objective matters. Many philosophers, and indeed non-philosophers, would deny that it is an objective matter whether a work of art is beautiful. Many would deny that that it is an objective matter whether a stew is tasty. [...] The aim of this book is to show how the assumption of global truth-evaluability *can* be made compatible with the view that not everything is objective. (Kölbel 2002, p. 19, original emphasis)

MacFarlane also points to subjectivity as a part of the motivation for relativism.

On the one hand, we want to capture the *subjectivity* of the issue – the degree to which their truth seems to depend not just on how things are with the objects they are

explicitly about, but on how things are with certain subjects. (MacFarlane 2007, p. 20, original emphasis)

It is not always clear what it takes for an area of discourse to count as subjective, but when MacFarlane talks about subjectivity, he talks about whether the truths in the domain are also dependent on a subject who is not explicitly mentioned. For instance, in the case of (4), the idea would be that its truth depends on not just on what haggis is like, but also on the relevant subject.

(4) Haggis is tasty.

Relativism seems to be in a good position to capture this kind of subjectivity. A relativist can say that (4) expresses a proposition that has different truth-values relative to different individuals or assessors. This is one way in which the truth-value can depend on a subject that is not explicitly mentioned.

But relativism is not the only way of making sense of subjectivity. This is something that relativist views have in common with contextualist views. According to a contextualist view, a sentence like (4) expresses different propositions in different contexts, depending on the relevant subject or subjects. This is another way in which the truth-value can depend on a subject that is not explicitly mentioned.

More generally, both contextualism and relativism can be seen as benefitting from arguments to the effect that certain sentences do not have a stable truth-value. However, relativism also benefits from arguments that purport to show that there is stability at the level of contents or propositions. In section 4.2 we turn to arguments of this sort.

## **4.2 Disagreement**

A significant part of the motivation for relativism is based on arguments against rival views. In particular, it has been important to relativists to argue that relativism has advantages over contextualist views. It is perhaps not difficult to get the impression that there is not much to choose between contextualist and relativist views. That is unsurprising given that ‘relativism’ used to be used as a term for both contextualism and what we are now calling ‘relativism’.

Both contextualism and relativism seem to be in a position to capture the perceived subjectivity of certain areas of discourse, such as discourse about matters of taste. But relativists have argued there are reasons to prefer their views to their contextualist rivals. A common strategy among relativists is to argue against contextualism on the basis of considerations involving disagreement.<sup>15</sup> In fact, this is something that most Contemporary Relativists have in common. MacFarlane offers the following remarks on contextualism, arguing that while contextualism can explain subjectivity, it has problems with disagreement.

The contextualist can explain [...] why speakers so readily make claims in these domains on the basis of their idiosyncratic tastes, senses of humour, or knowledge. However, by construing these claims as claims about the speaker (or some contextually relevant group), the contextualist makes it difficult to make sense of the *disagreement* speakers perceive in these areas of discourse. (MacFarlane 2007, p. 19, original emphasis)

In order to see why contextualism is supposed to have problems with disagreement, let us again look at predicates of taste and compare a simple relativist view with a simple contextualist view. Let us suppose that Nora sincerely asserts (4) and Jasmine sincerely asserts (6).

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<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that considerations involving disagreement are the only considerations that can be used to support a relativist view. See e.g. Kölbel (2009) and Lasersohn (2009) for relevant discussion.

(4) Haggis is tasty.

(6) Haggis is not tasty.

According to a simple contextualist view, the proposition expressed by (4) in Nora's context is the proposition that haggis tastes good to Nora, while the proposition expressed by (6) in Jasmine's context is the proposition that haggis tastes good to Jasmine. The worry is that this view fails to predict that Nora and Jasmine disagree. If the contextualist view were correct, there would be no obvious conflict involved. The proposition expressed (6) is not the negation of the proposition expressed by (4). Nora and Jasmine can believe what each of them says. Their respective assertions of (4) and (6) provide no immediate reason to think that they disagree. That, according to relativists, is a fundamental weakness of contextualism.

Similar problems arise in the case of epistemic modals. Let us suppose that Nora sincerely asserts (5) and Jasmine sincerely asserts (7).

(5) Harry might be in Boston.

(7) Harry can't be in Boston.

According to a simple contextualist view, the proposition expressed by (5) in Nora's context is the proposition that it is compatible with what Nora knows that Harry is in Boston, while the proposition expressed by (7) in Jasmine's context is the proposition that it is incompatible with what Jasmine knows that Harry is in Boston. The worry is again supposed to be that we fail to predict that they disagree. The proposition expressed by (7) is not the negation of the proposition expressed by (5).

If we adopt a relativist view, we are supposed to do better. For the purpose of this discussion, we can adopt something like Lasersohn's (2005) proposal. This allows us to say that the proposition expressed by (4) is true relative to Nora, but false relative to Jasmine and that

proposition expressed by (6) is false relative to Nora, but true relative to Jasmine. In that case, there is a conflict insofar as the propositions in question cannot both be true relative to the same circumstance of evaluation. If Nora believes that haggis is tasty and Jasmine believes that haggis is not tasty, there is a sense in which their beliefs are incompatible. A similar treatment is available in the case of (5) and (7). Whether this is enough to secure disagreement is something we will return to in section 5.2, but the general idea is that relativism has more resources than contextualism when it comes to explaining disagreement.<sup>16</sup>

### 4.3 Eavesdroppers

In addition to focusing on straightforward cases of disagreement, relativists have also emphasised the importance of cases involving eavesdropping.<sup>17</sup> These are cases in which a third-party who is not a participant in the conversation is assessing or commenting on the relevant assertion. In many ways, these cases are just an extension of the cases of disagreement that we looked at in section 4.2. However, according to relativists, eavesdropper cases show that the problems involving disagreement are not just problems for simple versions of contextualism.

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth emphasising that these kinds of arguments can take many forms and appeal to different considerations. It is natural to think of disagreement between individuals as a phenomenon at the level of mental states. As Jackson and Pettit put it, ‘disagreement [...] is a psychological phenomenon. The production of sentences make public our disagreements; it does not create them’ (Jackson & Pettit 1998, p. 251). But even if this is right, there are still relevant linguistic considerations that play an important role in the arguments of the relativists. For instance, Stephenson (2007, p. 493) emphasises that she is focusing a notion of disagreement that is tied to the use of expressions like ‘no’ and ‘nuh-uh’. Egan (2010) focuses on patterns of acceptance and disputes among speakers. We should also distinguish between cases in which the parties are participants in the same conversation and cases in which they are not, as Richard (2004, p. 218-219; 2008, p. 93-94) does. For the most part, these subtleties will not play an important role in the present discussion, but we will look at the role played by cases involving eavesdroppers in section 4.3. In any case, it is worth keeping these distinctions in mind when one considers the various arguments and responses that are presented in the literature.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Egan (2007) and MacFarlane (2011) for a discussion of eavesdroppers in connection with epistemic modals.

It is often observed that there are many cases of disagreement that only present a problem for a very simple version of contextualism. The importance of working with a more flexible and sophisticated contextualist theory has been emphasised by many opponents of relativism, including Glanzberg (2007), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, ch. 4), Janice Dowell (2011), and Jonathan Schaffer (2011). It is possible to account for many cases of disagreement by adopting a more sophisticated version of contextualism. For instance, according to a simple contextualist view about predicates of taste, it is only the tastes of the speaker that matter. Similarly, according to a simple contextualist view about epistemic modals, it is only what the speaker knows that is relevant. But more sophisticated versions of contextualism allow more flexibility when it comes to determining whose knowledge or tastes are relevant. This also makes it easier to explain disagreement. For instance, there is more scope for disagreement if the speaker is making a claim about what is tasty or fun for the members of a group and not just about what is tasty or fun for her.

However, eavesdropper cases are supposed to raise problems for this kind of response on behalf of contextualism. For instance, let us consider a case involving epistemic modals. Let us suppose that Jasmine is eavesdropping on Nora's conversation and that Nora is unaware of this fact. Furthermore, let us suppose that Jasmine knows that Harry is not in Boston. In that case, if Nora were to assert (5), it makes sense for Jasmine to say 'That's false' or 'Nora's wrong'.

(5) Harry might be in Boston.

As we pointed out above, the simple contextualist view about epistemic modals described in section 4.2 has problems with this<sup>18</sup>. What the eavesdropper adds is this: Let us suppose that

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<sup>18</sup> According to a simple contextualist view about epistemic modals, the proposition expressed by (5) in Nora's context is the proposition that it is compatible with what Nora knows that Harry is in Boston. But then it would not make sense for Jasmine to say that Nora said something false only on the basis of her knowledge that Harry is not in Boston. In fact, we

we adopt a more flexible version of contextualism, according to which Nora is making a claim about what is compatible with the combined knowledge of the conversational participants. This still would not include potential eavesdroppers. It would still not explain why it makes sense for Jasmine to say that Nora said something false. MacFarlane observes that if contextualists try to solve this problem by expanding the relevant group such that it also includes eavesdroppers, we end up having to interpret speakers as making claims that are too strong:

To sum up: the arguments that motivate a move from the “for all I know” reading of epistemic modals to the “for all we know” reading also motivate extending the scope of “we” to include not just the participants in the conversation but eavesdroppers, no matter how well hidden or how distantly separated in time and space. “It is possible that p” becomes “p is not ruled out by what is known by anyone who will ever consider this claim.” (MacFarlane 2011, p. 152)

MacFarlane goes on to argue that this would make most ordinary uses of epistemic modals irresponsible. Nora can be in a position to assert (5) even if she has no grounds for asserting that it is not ruled out by what is known by anyone who will consider her claim that Harry is in Boston. If this is correct, contextualists are left with a dilemma. They have to choose between explaining the appropriateness of the original assertion and explaining the eavesdropper’s response. The relativists argue that they can avoid the dilemma by saying that the proposition expressed by (5) is true relative to Nora, but false relative to Jasmine or something similar along those lines. In that case, it is supposed to be appropriate for Nora to make the assertion and for Jasmine to say that Nora is saying something false.

#### **4.4 Faultless Disagreement**

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can stipulate that Jasmine know that it is compatible with what Nora knows that Harry is in Boston.

The claim that relativism has an advantage when it comes to explaining disagreement is sometimes tied to the idea of faultless disagreement. A case of faultless disagreement is a case of disagreement in which neither party is wrong or making a mistake. In order for the disagreement to count as ‘faultless’ in the relevant sense, it is not enough that neither party is blameworthy or subject to rational criticism. If someone believes something that is not true, she counts as being wrong or having made a mistake even if her belief is based on seemingly strong evidence.

It has already been observed that Nora and Jasmine seem to disagree when Nora sincerely asserts (4) and Jasmine sincerely asserts (6).

(4) Haggis is tasty.

(6) Haggis is not tasty.

But it is also not clear that either of them has made any kind of mistake. The problem is making sense of that without being forced to say that they do not disagree. For instance, if the disagreement is a matter of one party believing a proposition and another party believing its negation, it is not clear how we can avoid saying that one of them makes the mistake of believing a proposition that is not true. This is where relativism comes into the picture. The idea is that relativism allows us to say that the proposition that Nora believes is true relative to Nora and that the proposition that Jasmine believes is true relative to Jasmine. In that case, we are supposed to conclude that neither of them has made a mistake.

Kölbel (2002, 2004, 2009) has been a prominent advocate of this line of argument, with Lasersohn (2005, p. 662) advancing a similar argument. Kölbel argues that relativism is in a unique position when it comes to being able to make sense of faultless disagreement.

There are disagreements without error, or in other words, some propositions are not



objective. However, minimal constraints on truth show that if it is true that  $p$ , then it is not true that  $\text{not-}p$ , and if it is true that  $\text{not-}p$ , then it is not true that  $p$ . So if one thinker believes that  $p$  and another thinker believes that  $\text{not-}p$ , one of them makes the mistake of believing a proposition that is not true. The only way to allow faultless disagreement is therefore to relativize truth to perspectives: one disputant's belief is true in his or her own perspective, and the other disputant's contradictory belief is true in his or her own perspective (Kölbel 2002, p. 100).

The problem of faultless disagreement is supposed to present a dilemma for non-relativists more generally. Unlike the problem discussed in section 4.2, it is not a problem that is specifically tied to contextualism. Nora and Jasmine either believe incompatible propositions or they do not. In the former case, the worry is that the disagreement is not faultless unless one takes the relativist route. In the latter the case, the worry is that there is no disagreement.

However, not all relativists take faultless disagreement to play an important role in the case for relativism. Some relativists, such as MacFarlane (2005b, 2007), do not explicitly emphasise the possibility of faultless disagreement as a motivation for relativism. In fact, Richard (2008, p. 132) argues that faultless disagreement remains problematic even for relativists. One should therefore be careful about assuming that relativists have to be committed to the possibility of faultless disagreement or that faultless disagreement is an essential part of the motivation for relativism.

## **5 Problems for Relativism**

Relativism has faced a number of objections. Some critics have focused on the motivation behind specific applications of relativism. For instance, there has been a lot of debate about the role that disagreement plays in motivating relativist views. But there are also objections that purport to show that there is something wrong with relativism on a more general level. The worry is that relativism is somehow incoherent or that the view cannot be properly stated.

The plan is to start by looking at some objections of the latter sort before we take on the debate about disagreement.

### **5.1 General Problems**

One worry is that relativism is somehow self-refuting. For instance, if someone were to claim that there are no absolute truths in the sense that all propositions are true relative to some individuals and false relative to others, that would entail that the proposition that there are no absolute truths is also not an absolute truth. It would be true relative to some individuals and false relative to others. This is supposed to show that there is something wrong with the relativist position. More needs to be said before something like this can be turned into a genuine argument. Kölbel (2011) discusses attempts to do that. But for present purposes it is important to remember that the kind of Contemporary Relativist views that we are interested in have not been put forward as global views. Contemporary Relativists have instead been making local claims about, say, predicates of taste or epistemic modals. These relativist views are unlikely to be susceptible to straightforward self-refutation worries of this sort.<sup>19</sup>

Having said that, there are other general worries that are still relevant. One set of issues concerns assertion and belief. Relativists have recognised the importance of explaining how assertion works from a relativist perspective. For instance, if assertions aim at truth, what does that amount to if truth is relative? MacFarlane (2005b) and Egan (2007) are among those who have attempted to meet versions of this challenge. MacFarlane attempts to answer this challenge by developing an account of assertion in terms of the speaker's commitments whereas Egan attempts to reconcile relativism with Stalnaker's (1978) picture of assertion and communication.

Similar issues arise in the case of belief. Aaron Zimmerman (2007) argues that relativism has problems when it comes to making sense of believing propositions that are true or false

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<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Wright (2008) and MacFarlane (2014, ch. 2) for relevant discussion.

relative to other parameters than worlds. He argues that it is impossible to accept relativism and believe the relativist propositions without being irrational. For instance, if Nora recognises that the proposition that haggis is tasty is true relative to her standards, but false relative to other people's standards, she will not believe that proposition. She will only believe the proposition that haggis tastes good relative to her standards. To the extent that these considerations involving assertion and belief present a problem for relativism, they present a problem for both global and local versions of relativism.

Another worry that has been raised by Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne (2009) is that a relativist might have a hard time distinguishing her position from the position of a realist who does not accept either contextualism or relativism.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, relativists have access to a monadic truth predicate 'is true' that obeys standard disquotational principles. This allows them to make statements such as (8).

(8) Nora believes that haggis isn't tasty. Haggis is tasty. Therefore, what Nora believes is false.

On the other hand, Cappelen and Hawthorne argue that realists can also make sense of constructions such as 'true by the standards of so-and-so'. Simplifying somewhat, it becomes hard to distinguish the way that relativists talk from the way that realists talk. Again, insofar as this is a problem, it is not just a problem for global versions of relativism.

## **5.2 Too Little Disagreement**

Insofar as disagreement plays an important role in the motivation for relativism, it should not come as a surprise that this is a topic that has attracted a lot of controversy. Some of the critics have raised questions about whether relativist views deliver the right predictions about

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<sup>20</sup> Another interesting question is what distinguishes relativism from sophisticated forms of expressivism and non-factualism like those defended by, among others, Gibbard (1990, 2003) and Yalcin (2007, 2011). For relevant discussion see e.g. Kölbel (2002, p. 110-115).

disagreement. Other critics have argued that relativists have exaggerated the problems that contextualist views face when it comes to explaining disagreement. In what follows, we will look at some examples of both kinds of criticism.

The idea that relativism allows us to make sense of faultless disagreement has proven to be particularly controversial. The possibility of faultless disagreement has even been described as absurd by some commentators, including Jason Stanley (2005, p. 141) and Glanzberg (2007, p. 16). Different arguments have been put forward which purport to show that relativism cannot deliver faultless disagreement.<sup>21</sup> For instance, Richard (2008, p. 132) and Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, p. 131) argue that if relativists want to make sense of faultless disagreement, they have to accept the truth of sentences like (9) and they take this to be a problematic consequence.

(9) There is no fault whatsoever in speaking falsely.

However, the criticism has also been directed at the more general claims that relativists have made about disagreement. It is important to the relativists that they are in a position to explain the disagreement in cases in which contextualists supposedly fail to do that. For instance, they claim to be in a position to say that Nora and Jasmine disagree when Nora sincerely asserts (4) and Jasmine sincerely asserts (6).

(4) Haggis is tasty.

(6) Haggis is not tasty.

According to the simple relativist story that we considered in section 4.2, there is a proposition, the proposition that haggis is tasty, such that Nora believes that proposition and

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<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Stojanovic (2007), Moruzzi (2008), Rosenkranz (2008), and Moltmann (2010) for relevant discussion.

Jasmine believes its negation. That proposition is true relative to Nora, but false relative to Jasmine.

A worry is that the simple relativist story presupposes that it is sufficient for disagreement that there is a proposition such that one party believes that proposition and the other party believes its negation. But if we look at other views according to which propositional truth is relative, this assumption starts to look less plausible. For instance, MacFarlane (2007) observes that tensed propositions, propositions that are true or false relative to times, seem to present a problem for this sufficient condition for disagreement.

Consider, for example, tensed propositions, which have truth values relative to world/time pairs. One such proposition is the proposition that Joe is sitting [...]. If you assert this proposition at 2 PM and I deny it at 3 PM, we have not in any real sense disagreed. Your assertion concerned Joe's position at 2 PM, while my denial concerned his position at 3 PM. So accepting and rejecting the same proposition cannot be sufficient for disagreement. (MacFarlane 2007, p. 22)

MacFarlane goes on to argue that a similar point can be made regarding propositions that are true or false relative to worlds. However, he thinks that his relativist view can provide a solution to the problem since it allows him to distinguish between parameters that are determined by the context of use and parameters that are determined by the context of assessment. While the world and time parameters fall into the first category, the parameters that relativists are interested in fall into the second category. But even if MacFarlane (2007) takes these considerations to provide support for the kind of relativist view that he favours, it is safe to say that not everyone has been convinced. Some critics, including James Dreier (2009) and Ragnar Francén (2010), have questioned whether MacFarlane has succeeded in solving the problem. This remains a point of controversy in the debate.

### 5.3 Too Much Disagreement

So far we have considered the worry that relativists fail to live up their promises when it comes to predicting enough disagreement. However, there is also a worry that relativist views predict too much disagreement. Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, p. 122-124) have pointed out that there are cases involving predicates of taste in which we do not find disagreement. They invite us to consider a scenario in which a child asserts (10) on the grounds that she is going to a music camp, while her parents assert (11) on the grounds that they have to work overtime during the summer.

(10)        The summer is going to be fun.

(11)        The summer isn't going to be fun.

In this case, it would be strange to say that the child and her parents disagree. But Cappelen and Hawthorne argue that this is what relativists are committed to. For instance, if we look at how relativists treat (4) and (6), it is not clear why (10) and (11) would be different.

(4) Haggis is tasty.

(6) Haggis is not tasty.

In order to avoid this problem, relativists have to find a way of distinguishing between these cases. Lasersohn (2011, p. 436-437) has for instance proposed that there might be multiple dimensions of context-dependence at work. In particular, he suggests that the summer can be construed as a complex event and that the parties are talking about different parts of it. However, there is a danger that moves like this will make the overall relativist story more complicated.

The worry that relativist views predict too much disagreement also applies to cases involving eavesdroppers. Kai von Fintel and Anthony Gillies (2008, p. 91) use a case involving

epistemic modals embedded under disjunction to illustrate this point. Let us suppose that Bond has planted misleading evidence, hoping that Blofeld will find it and come to believe that Bond is in Zürich. In fact, Bond is in London with Leiter and they are listening to Blofeld through a bug that Bond planted along with the misleading evidence. Blofeld finds the misleading evidence, but he remains suspicious and only asserts (12).

(12) Bond might be in Zürich or he might be in London.

In this case, it looks like it would be inappropriate for Leiter to say ‘That’s false’ or ‘Blofeld’s wrong’ in response to what Blofeld said. But von Fintel and Gillies argue that the relativists cannot predict this. They argue that (12) entails (13) and (14).

(13) Bond might be in Zürich.

(14) Bond might be in London.

If that is correct, the relativists have a problem. The problem is that the proposition expressed by (13) is false relative to Leiter and his context of assessment. That means that relativists have to explain why cases like (12) should be treated differently than the cases discussed in section 4.2 and 4.3. Otherwise, it looks like the relativists are predicting too much disagreement.

#### **5.4 Contextualism and Disagreement**

While some critics have focused on the relativist story about disagreement, others have argued that disagreement presents a less serious problem for contextualist views than relativists have argued. If that is correct, a significant part of the motivation for relativism is lost.

An interesting view that has emerged from the debate is the so-called ‘cloud of contexts’ view developed by von Fintel and Gillies (2008, 2011). They primarily discuss this view in connection with epistemic modals, but there is no obvious reason why a similar strategy could not work in other cases as well. When a speaker uses a sentence containing an epistemic modal like ‘might’, there is a question of whose knowledge or information counts as relevant. According to von Fintel and Gillies, the context does not fully determine whose knowledge counts as relevant. In fact, there are multiple admissible contexts.

There is no such thing as “the context”, only the contexts admissible or compatible with the facts as they are. The context of the conversation really does not provide a determinate resolution and we propose to model this by saying that there is a cloud of contexts at the given point of the conversation. (von Fintel and Gillies 2011, p. 118-119)

As a result of there being multiple admissible contexts, multiple propositions are ‘put into play’, as von Fintel and Gillies put it. In order for a speaker to be in a position to make an assertion, she does not have to be in a position to assert all of the propositions that are put into play. She only needs to be in a position to assert one of them. However, the hearer can respond to a stronger proposition, depending on her epistemic position and what counts as a cooperative contribution to the conversation.

This is meant to address at least some of the problems with contextualist views. For instance, a speaker might use a sentence containing an epistemic modal on the basis of being in position to assert one of the weaker propositions that is put into play, such as the proposition that the relevant proposition is compatible with her knowledge. However, an eavesdropper might be responding to one of the stronger propositions that has been put into play, even if that is a proposition that the speaker would not be in a position to assert.



More generally, it is worth recognising that what is at issue does not have to be the propositions expressed by the relevant sentences.<sup>22</sup> In his discussion of contextualism about aesthetic predicates, Tim Sundell (2011) argues that many cases of disagreement are about the selection and appropriateness of the relevant aesthetic standards. Torfinn Huvenes (2012) argues that cases of disagreement involving predicates of taste can be understood in terms of conflicting non-doxastic attitudes, attitudes other than beliefs, such as desires or preferences.<sup>23</sup> If Nora likes haggis and Jasmine dislikes haggis, the difference in attitudes constitutes a conflict and is sufficient for them to disagree. Huvenes (2014) argues that this is also a way of making sense of faultless disagreement. If the parties disagree in virtue of having conflicting desires or preferences, there is little or no pressure to think that one of them is somehow wrong or has made a mistake. This way of making sense of faultless disagreement also avoids many of the problems facing a relativist account of faultless disagreement.

There is no conflict between these responses. Some responses might work better in some cases, while other responses might work better in other cases. It also matters what kinds of expressions we are talking about. For instance, it makes sense to try to explain cases of disagreement involving predicates of taste in terms of the non-doxastic attitudes of the parties. But it is arguably more difficult to see how this is going to work in the case of knowledge ascriptions. In any case, the important point is that contextualists have more resources when it comes to explaining disagreement than is sometimes recognised. If it turns out that relativism is not in a better position than contextualism when it comes to explaining disagreement, that would undermine a significant part of the motivation for relativism.

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<sup>22</sup> See e.g. von Fintel and Gillies (2008) for a discussion about relativism about epistemic modals in which they emphasise that it does not have to be the propositions expressed by the relevant sentences that are at issue. For instance, they point that when a speaker asserts a sentence like ‘Harry might be in Boston’, the reply might be targeting the proposition that Harry is in Boston, the so-called ‘prejacent’.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Huvenes (forthcoming) for a related treatment of epistemic modals in terms of different credences.

## 6 Conclusion

MacFarlane, in the Preface to his book *Assessment Sensitivity*, says:

Analytic philosophers are now considerably more open to relativism about truth than they were when I began this project. My initial aim was merely to place relativist views on the table as real options. Many of those who initially accused these views of incoherence have come around to regarding them as merely empirically false.

(MacFarlane 2014, p. vii)

MacFarlane is right that the form of relativism we have been concerned with in this article is now, for the most part, considered an empirical hypothesis about the workings of natural language. It has strengths and weaknesses, some of them sketched above. No matter how one thinks those will balance out at the end of the day, relativism has emerged as an important and influential framework for thinking about truth and natural language.

We want to end with a reminder and a vague conjecture. The reminder is this: For those who use ‘relativism’ in the way that Harman and Velleman use it, the debate we have described might seem strange. After all, they would apply the term ‘relativism’ to both contextualist and relativist views. The vague conjecture is this: Perhaps one way to see continuity between the two senses of ‘relativism’ involves a joint concern with hidden (or *unobvious*) relativity. On the one hand, if there is a hidden variable associated with the expression, e.g. an unpronounced ‘for x’, we have one form of hidden (unobvious) relativity. On the other hand, if the truth-value of the proposition expressed by a sentence containing that expression is relative in one of the ways we described in section 2, we have another form of hidden (unobvious) relativity. So understood, the Traditional and Contemporary Relativists are

concerned with a joint phenomenon and can be seen as giving different ways of characterizing it.

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