

This is the author version of the following article:
Podlaskowski, A. (2014). Review of John MacFarlane’s “Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth And Its Applications.” *Polish Journal of Philosophy*, Spring, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 95–98. The final version is available at:
https://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=pjphil&id=pjphil_2014_0008_0001_0095_0098

John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. IX + 344, ISBN 9780199682751

The thesis that *truth is relative* enjoys a long history of refutation. In *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*, John MacFarlane suggests that, while many charges have been raised against relative truth, not nearly enough has been done to characterize the position with the care required to defend against those criticisms. This book is a carefully argued effort to devise a relativist position worthy of the name—one that aims to remain unfazed by traditional objections. In doing so, MacFarlane rehabilitates a position on truth with the potential to inform an alternative to other semantic programs.

MacFarlane opens chapter one by discussing typical responses to matters of taste, such as commenting on apples being tasty. What does one *mean* by apples being tasty? His discussion of the major responses to this (and related) questions—objectivism, contextualism, and expressivism—suggests various desiderata for an account of judgments about taste. This sets the stage for a preview of his own approach: that truth is relative to contexts of assessment, a theory promising to apply far beyond judgments of taste. Chapter two is devoted to discussing (and, in some instances, dispensing with) traditional objections to relativism. Of course, there is the famous charge that (global) relativism is self-refuting. Relativism has also been accused of being unable to adequately explain certain kinds of disagreements; that it lacks proper truth-bearers; and that the relativist’s truth predicate is not the one featured in the equivalence schema “The proposition that ϕ is true iff ϕ .” By MacFarlane’s judgment, though, the most pressing charge is that it is entirely unclear what it even means to say that truth is relative in the first place.

In chapters three, four, five, and six, MacFarlane develops a brand of relativism designed to avoid traditional objections, as well as satisfying the desiderata laid out in chapter one. His strategy (starting in chapter three) is to expand the use of semantic theories that relativize the truth of a proposition to a time and world at which it is uttered. MacFarlane grants that these context indices do not involve the sorts of relativization interestingly associated with truth relativism; but that sort of framework can be *augmented* to include contexts of assessment, thereby introducing the requisite materials. This involves developing (in chapter four) an account of propositions (*qua* truth-bearers) according to which their being assigned truth-values cannot be done absolutely. Instead, we judge the truth of a proposition relative to both the context in which it is uttered and the context in which it is evaluated. This is meant to capture the idea that the truth of propositions about what is tasty, for instance, depends (in part) on the utterer's gastronomical standards.

That the truth of a proposition is not fixed absolutely allows for a divergence in the conditions under which assertions can be *made* or be *retracted*. In chapter five, MacFarlane relies on this point to help answer the charge that there is no sense to truth being relative. More specifically, adapting Michael Dummett's reservations about giving a formal definition of truth without linking it to usage, MacFarlane appeals to *practical* differences in making assertions to characterize an assessment-sensitive truth predicate, and to distinguish his from other positions (pp. 98-101). Whereas the truth of an assertion about what is tasty, for instance, depends on the speaker's tastes at the time the assertion is made, whether an assertion should be retracted depends on the speaker's current tastes. For example, Jones found apples to be tasty as a child, so that the truth of his assertions about apples being tasty depended on what he found tasty at the time. As an adult, though, Jones finds apples to be disgusting. And so, on MacFarlane's account, Jones is now required to retract his earlier assertion since it is not true as it was originally asserted (as a child) as well as when it was presently assessed (as an apple-hating adult). This promising response meets a desideratum from chapter one; and his distinctive emphasis on assertion-making and assertion-retracting conditions coming apart helps to distinguish his relativist position from others.

Because of his specific emphasis on pragmatics, the objection might arise that the thesis advanced by MacFarlane falls short of the exotic relativist doctrine that most have in mind. However, though the position defended by MacFarlane is less flamboyant than its (paradox-ridden) predecessors, he nevertheless provides a substantive alternative to other semantic theories.

The position so yielded is designed to avoid the awkwardness that absolutist positions on truth face when applied to, e.g., statements about matters of taste. It enjoys the same predictive successes as (non-indexical) contextualism, but also avoids many of the problems that position traditionally faces—most notably, the problem of lost disagreement (a point developed in chapter six). MacFarlane’s position also avoids problems facing more traditional forms of expressivism (including providing acceptable retraction conditions); and it enjoys subtler advantages over more sophisticated forms of expressivism, such as Allan Gibbard defends. In short, MacFarlane’s reopens a region of logical space; and he remains refreshingly modest by conceding that, whether our language ultimately exhibits sensitivity to contexts of assessment is a matter best settled empirically.

The worry might persist, however, that the objection in response to which pragmatic considerations were invoked will not be settled without speaking to the *nature* of truth—we require a better sense for what truth could *be* such that it is assessment-sensitive. For his part, MacFarlane appeals to primitivism (about truth) to reject the need to provide any such account (pp. 98, 100). In this respect, he follows Donald Davidson who casts doubt on defining truth by appeal to more primitive concepts. The primitivist’s point, roughly, is that truth is so basic to thought and language that we might not have any other concepts without it. If anything, we need *that* concept to understand others.

I am concerned, however, that MacFarlane cannot rely on primitivism, for his program does not center on the truth predicate for which primitivism might prove persuasive. After all, if the primitive’s point holds any appeal, it does so for the truth predicate used in ordinary use—namely, the truth predicate featured in the equivalence schema. But MacFarlane’s account does not center on the *ordinary* notion, but rather on a *technical* one (p. 93). More specifically, the predicate featured in the equivalence schema, as MacFarlane concedes, is a monadic (assessment-insensitive) truth predicate. In contrast, MacFarlane’s theory features a dyadic (assessment-sensitive) truth predicate. By including the monadic truth predicate in the object language, MacFarlane is able to provide a semantics for that predicate using a dyadic, assessment-sensitive truth predicate. Even if this renders the relativist’s account of truth compatible with the equivalence schema, it is doubtful that MacFarlane’s dyadic truth predicate deserves the same primitivist gloss as the monadic truth predicate. The reason should be clear: it is entirely unclear how a technical notion could count as primitive in the relevant sense. The gap originally filled by primitivism, then, remains open. To be fair, this point does not sink MacFarlane’s program; but it does suggest

more must be said, as he fails to dodge the demand to provide an account of the *nature* of assessment-sensitive truth.

This concern aside, MacFarlane's position has a variety of applications, making up the second part of the book. With each application, MacFarlane not only further distinguishes his own position from its rivals, but he repeatedly demonstrates how assessment-sensitive relativism can provide another option for resolving philosophical disputes. Moreover, MacFarlane's hypothesis that assessment sensitivity is a potentially widespread linguistic phenomenon is made increasingly plausible as the reader finds that the semantic framework he develops can be adapted to a variety of issues (while still lending itself to a single, systematic semantic theory). In chapter seven, a relativist semantics for judgments about taste is developed; chapter eight focuses on knowledge; chapter nine presents a relativist semantics for our ordinary talk of the future; chapter ten is devoted to epistemic modality; and eleven is devoted to a relativist semantics for likelihood judgments pertinent to deontic judgments. In each case, the relativist treatment of the relevant fragment of language (complete with compositional semantics) provides an alternative answer to distinct philosophical issues. Unfortunately, there is too little space here to discuss in detail each application of the theory. But for those who work through the fine points of these applications, the position's appeal will be made evident.

Over all, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications* is characterized by careful attention to the details of a wide range of arguments. While many of the book's constituent parts have previously appeared in print in one form or another, together they make for a great addition to the literature on truth and truth-conditional semantics—something that should excite experts (and graduate students) working in a variety of areas. Whether or not you find each part of MacFarlane's case entirely convincing, it should be clear that he succeeds in showing that relativism (properly construed) represents a theoretical option worthy of additional consideration.

Adam C. Podlaskowski
Fairmont State University
Fairmont, West Virginia, USA