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# RELATIVISM ABOUT TRUTH: A CRITIQUE

Richard Hamilton

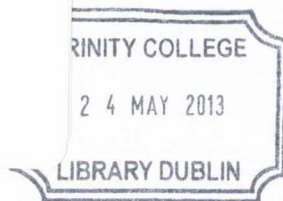
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## SUMMARY

This thesis examines John MacFarlane's attempt to make sense of relative truth, but concludes by rejecting the coherence of such an attempt, on the grounds that it fails to adequately address a problem that was posed by Gareth Evans.

We begin by showing the motivations for contemporary relativism about truth, we define what makes it different from other forms of relativism, and we indicate its basic structure in Chapter One.

Chapter Two focusses in more detail on a particular account of relative truth, John MacFarlane's account of double contextuality, as it is presented across a number of papers over the past decade. We note a challenge to such a theory from Gareth Evans, based on ideas about the norms of assertion.

On foot of MacFarlane's response to Evans, in Chapter Three we examine the origins of his preferred account of the norms of assertion, origins which lie in Robert Brandom's theories of truth and language use.

In our final chapter, Chapter Four, we return to MacFarlane's relativism, and, on the basis of what we have discovered about Brandom, we examine if his appropriation of Brandom's Norms is indeed coherent. After formulating a dilemma that we pose to MacFarlane concerning his use of those norms, we conclude that his appropriation is not coherent, and thus, we conclude that MacFarlane fails to adequately respond to at least one major challenge to his relativism about truth.

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# 1 Introduction to Relative Truth

## 1.1 *The Core Claims of this Thesis*

This section briefly introduces the main problem discussed in this thesis, which is an argument – based on the norms of assertion – against a certain contemporary articulation of truth relativism. It also explains my choice of John MacFarlane as the main representative of contemporary truth relativism, and furthermore introduces the claims that will be made about Robert Brandom in support of the main thesis. Finally, this section will sketch the main argument of the thesis, which takes the form of a dilemma that is posed to MacFarlane's truth relativism, in the final chapter.

### 1.1.1 **The Main Challenge to Truth Relativism**

Doctrines that travel under the title of 'relativism' have been proposed, debated, and more often than not, rejected since philosophical antiquity. Relativism manifests itself in many forms even today, and distinguishing relativism about truth – the form of relativism that this thesis is concerned with – from the other forms that abound is the task of section 1.2. The central claim of this thesis is, whatever other problems truth relativism may have, it fails to answer at least one serious challenge, concerning the norms that govern assertion. The challenge is as follows: in our everyday activity as language users, we make assertions, that is, we assert that things are so, or not so. If those things are as we say they are, then our assertions are true. If not, they are false. Asserting is a normative activity, that is to say there are rules, or norms that explain what it is to



count as an assertion. A common way to regard the norms of assertion is that we should, in general, aim to only assert things that are true. But if truth is relative, it is too elusive, or unstable a thing to aim at. It is like a moving target, or worse, an unseen target. If this objection turns out to be well founded, we can say that relative truth fails to live up to one of the core expectations we ought to have of an account of truth, which is to act as the norm that governs the act of assertion. We ought to conclude on that basis that a coherent account of relative truth cannot be articulated.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1.1.1 *The Idea of Norms of Assertion*

Part of the preamble to stating the charge against relativism, then, must be to explain in more detail why we might think that assertion is an activity that is governed by norms. An assertion is a type of speech act, specifically it is a speech act that makes a claim that things are a certain way, for example ‘Earth has one moon’, or ‘it is raining in Dublin’. Timothy Williamson has spelled out the links from speech acts, to rules and norms

Assertions are praised as true, informative, relevant, sincere, warranted, well-phrased, or polite. They are criticized as false, uninformative, irrelevant, insincere, unwarranted, ill-phrased, or rude. Sometimes they deserve such praise or criticism. If any respect in which performances of an act can deserve praise or criticism is a *norm* for that act, then the speech act of assertion has many norms. So has almost any act; jumps can deserve praise as long or brave, criticism as short or cowardly. But it is natural to suppose that some norms are more intimately connected to the nature of asserting than any norm is to the nature of jumping. One might suppose, for example, that someone who knowingly asserts a falsehood has thereby broken a rule of assertion, much as if he had broken a rule of a game; he has cheated.<sup>2</sup>

Those norms that are ‘more intimately connected to the nature of asserting’ are called

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1 This is a very brief rendition of Gareth Evans’ challenge in Gareth Evans, *Collected Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Evans’ challenge is discussed in more detail below (1.1.1.2) and throughout the thesis.

2 Timothy Williamson, “Knowing and Asserting,” *Philosophical Review* 105, no. 4 (1996): 489.

constitutive norms, that is, an assertion is an assertion through adhering to such a norm. As to what the norm is, there are several choices that are popular in the current literature, from Williamson's own 'knowledge norm', to the 'truth norm' originating in Dummett's work,<sup>3</sup> another is the 'justification norm'.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, philosophers such as Herman Cappelen go so far as to deny that the set of linguistic objects grouped as 'assertions' is anything more than a philosophical device, hence there is no real sense to talk of the norms of assertion.<sup>5</sup>

Although we will say a little more about the effect our choice of norm has on the plausibility of truth relativism, we will chiefly be concerned with the truth norm, since that is the norm that is involved in the challenge as it is made to truth relativism, and as responded to by MacFarlane. We shall also have a lot to say about a certain kind of justification norm that is put forward by Robert Brandom, since it is heavily involved in MacFarlane's proposed answer to the challenge that is under consideration here.

The truth norm is perhaps the most natural way to think about the normativity of assertion, since the concepts of truth and assertion have often been linked together. For example, if we note that to assert a proposition can also function as a claim that it is true, we can use that 'platitude' to explain something about truth in terms of assertion (that it is partly constitutive of our notion of truth, as Crispin Wright argues),<sup>6</sup> or indeed, we can explain something about assertion in terms of truth, (that assertion conforms to the norm 'assert only what is true').

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3 Michael Dummett, "Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1959): 141–162.

4 A version of the justification norm originating in Brandom's work, and adopted by MacFarlane will be a central topic of this thesis. Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 1994), chap. 3.

5 Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen, *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011).

6 Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 22–23.

**1.1.1.2 The Evans Problem and its Application to Truth Relativism**

As we will see in following sections and chapters, the essence of truth relativism is that the same proposition can have varying truth values in varying circumstances, that is, the truth value of a proposition can change according to a certain shiftable parameter such as a standard of taste. Some decades ago, in what will be referred to as the Evans problem, Gareth Evans claimed that if we encounter a theory that holds that truth and falsity can vary with a shiftable parameter, then that theory has a problem. The problem is, such a conception of truth cannot play its leading role as the goal at which we aim in making sincere assertions. It cannot function as a norm that regulates the propriety of our assertions. The reason Evans thinks this is that he sees shiftability when it comes to truth as something that would render our idea of truth too unstable to function as a proper norm, a standard to aim at. For if the truth of my utterance now is hostage to a shifting context, how am I to aim at saying something true? How do I know what to aim at? If I knew, I could point to fixed truth conditions, and then we would have to deny that truth is shifty, or relative. Evans' criticism in full is as follows:

Such a conception of assertion is not coherent. In the first place, I do not understand the use of our ordinary word 'correct' to apply to one and the same historical act at some times and not at others, according to the state of the weather. Just as we use the terms 'good' and 'bad', 'obligatory' and 'permitted' to make an assessment, once and for all, of non-linguistic actions, so we use the term 'correct' to make a once-and-for-all assessment of speech acts. Secondly, even if we strain to understand the notion 'correct-at-t', it is clear that a theory of meaning which states the semantic values of particular utterances solely by the use of it cannot serve as a theory of sense. If a theory of reference permits a subject to deduce merely that a particular utterance is now correct, but later will be incorrect, it cannot assist the subject in deciding what to say, nor in interpreting the remarks of others. What should he aim at, or take the others to be aiming at? Maximum correctness? But of course, if he knew an answer to this question, it would necessarily generate a once-and-for-all assessment of utterances, according to whether or not they meet whatever condition the answer gave. In fact, we know what he should do; he should utter sentence types true at the time of utterance. One who utters the sentence type 'it is raining' rules out dry weather

only at the time of utterance; he does not rule out later dryness, and hence there can be no argument from the later state of the weather to a reappraisal of his utterance. Utterances have to be evaluated according to what they rule out, and so different utterances of the same tensed sentences made at different times may have to be evaluated (once and for all) differently. They cannot therefore all be assigned the same semantic value.<sup>7</sup>

Evans was not taking aim at relativism of the variety under scrutiny here, even less at MacFarlane's work, since Evans' objection predates the rise of contemporary truth relativism. Rather, he was criticising the sort of temporalism put forward by A.N. Prior,<sup>8</sup> whereby a proposition has a fixed meaning, but its truth can vary with time. Thus 'Socrates is sitting' expresses the same thing each time it is uttered, but sometimes it will be true and sometimes false according to the time.

MacFarlane explicitly likens his position to temporalism<sup>9</sup>, and as we shall see in the next section, MacFarlane's relativism can helpfully be characterised as a broader version of Prior's position, whereby the truth value a proposition has may vary with a whole host of parameters, rather than just time (as it does in temporalism).

So by attacking the particular form of temporalism – which is really a narrower form of truth relativism – on the grounds that it renders the truth value of assertions unstable, Evans' is *a fortiori* attacking truth relativism on the same grounds.

### 1.1.2 MacFarlane as Representative

Although there are a number of contemporary analytic relativists who propose comparable systems, such as Max Kölbel<sup>10</sup>, Mark Richard<sup>11</sup>, Peter Lasersohn,<sup>12</sup> and Andy Egan, John Hawthorne

7 Evans, *Collected Papers*, 349/50.

8 Arthur Prior, *Past, Present and Future* (OUP Oxford, 1967).

9 John MacFarlane, "Nonindexical Contextualism," *Synthese* 166, no. 2 (2009): 233.

10 Max Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity* (London: Routledge, 2002).

11 Mark Richard, *When Truth Gives Out* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2008).

12 Peter Lasersohn, "Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28, no. 6 (2005): 643–686; "Relative Truth, Speaker Commitment, and Control of Implicit Arguments,"

and Brian Weatherson,<sup>13</sup> I will focus on MacFarlane. These other contemporary relativists may be called on from time to time for comparison's sake.

MacFarlane motivates one general and unified picture of relative truth that can answer various particular problems. It is global enough to be applicable anywhere it is useful. For example, in focussing on the semantics, the question of which domains we want to apply it to is left open. This means we do not *have to* make metaphysical arguments of the sort 'moral claims, aesthetic claims and so on concern a type of thing that is only true relative to a further parameter, whereas other domains are not'. Doing this would force us to show what was so special about certain domains and not others, and in any case, we want the theory to be about relative *truth*, rather than the relative content of moral statements and so on. Worse still, we want to avoid having to make a general claim about truth as such, along the lines of 'all truth is relative to a perspective', since this immediately embroils us in self-refutation issues. Relativising the semantics then seems to give us the pay-offs of global relativism without the Protagorean pains of self-refutation charges.

I will focus on the system as it has been developed to date in the following papers, 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth' (2003), 'Making Sense of Relative Truth' (2005), 'The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions' (2005), 'Relativism and Disagreement' (2007), 'Semantic Minimalism and Nonindexical Contextualism' (2007), 'Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths' (2008), 'Nonindexical Contextualism' (2009), 'Epistemic Modals are Assessment Sensitive' (2011), and to some extent, where MacFarlane's ideas have developed in important or clarificatory ways from his published papers, I will mention his draft manuscript – *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*.<sup>14</sup>

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*Synthese* 166, no. 2 (2009): 359–374.

13 Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 131–69.

14 John MacFarlane, "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 212 (2003): 321–36; "Making Sense of Relative Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005): 305–323; "The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology: Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 197–233; "Relativism and Disagreement," *Philosophical Studies* 132 (2007): 17–31; "Semantic Minimalism and Nonindexical Contextualism," in *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New*

As we shall see, it is largely the same system that is developed as we go along, and it is general enough to remain essentially the same no matter what the application is.

### 1.1.3 Claims Concerning Brandom

In ‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’<sup>15</sup> MacFarlane admits that the Evans charge would indeed be a fatal one, if he was of the view that truth functions as the norm of assertion. Why should that be our picture of assertion however, he asks? In its place he offers us the account of assertion that Brandom gives us in his magnum opus, *Making it Explicit*.<sup>16</sup> In that picture, rather than talking about truth as a guiding norm, assertion is regulated by other norms, such as accepting responsibility for your assertion, inferring what other assertions the asserter is entitled to and prohibited from, as well as the duty to give reasons for your assertion or else retract it when challenged. This picture of assertion is referred to as the deontic<sup>17</sup> scorekeeping model, because it focusses on various duties and entitlements that we are bound to as responsible asserters, rather than goals or things that we aim at in asserting.

Given that MacFarlane's defence against the Evans objection rests entirely on his acceptance of this ‘challenge based’ account of assertion that we find in Brandom’s work, our third chapter will focus on teasing out the various strands of Brandom’s work. As such, we will make various exegetical and interpretative claims concerning Brandom, and these claims will form the keystone of our eventual rejection of MacFarlane's system.

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*Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 240–50; “Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths,” in *Relative Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81–102; “Nonindexical Contextualism”; John MacFarlane, “Epistemic Modals Are Assessment-Sensitive,” in *Epistemic Modality*, ed. Brian Weatherson and Andy Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); “Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications”, Draft Manuscript.

15 MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth.”

16 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, chap. 3.

17 Deontic, from the Greek, meaning duty, that which is binding. ‘Greek *δέον*, *δεοντ*- that which is binding, duty (neuter of present participle of *δεῖ* it is binding, it behoves)’ Oxford English Dictionary, “Deontology, N.1.”, n.d., <http://oed.com/view/Entry/50155>.

Briefly put, our findings concerning Brandom will be that he is a Pragmatist, where this term is construed quite narrowly as a position concerning theories of truth and meaning. Pragmatism in the Brandomian sense is a deflationary view about truth, reference, and a number of other key concepts in the history of philosophy. Deflationary here will mean that, for instance, Brandom doesn't think that there is any such property called 'truth'. Rather, truth has an important expressive role; using linguistic locutions and phrases involving 'true' and so on allows us to express claims we could not otherwise express. But there is no property that is 'truth', independent of our claimings and assertions. The main thread of what we will find in Chapter Three is that Brandom's pragmatic strategy consists in describing properties in terms of activities, very much in keeping with Peirce's 'pragmatic maxim', to 'Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object'.<sup>18</sup>

The main claim that we want to make about Brandom is that there is a far greater link between his account of assertion, and his deflationary account of truth than MacFarlane allows. There are close links in both directions, since Brandom never mentions the idea of truth in his account of the norms of assertion. Normally, there might be pressure on such a position from the direction of the sort of 'platitudes' that Wright for example takes to be constitutive of assertion, namely that truth has an integral part to play in the act of asserting.<sup>19</sup> Obviously this pressure is relieved by holding a deflationary position, as Brandom does. Vice-versa, if Brandom is not to offer us a simple but unsatisfactory nihilist account of truth whereby he says nothing at all about it, he needs the account of the activity of asserting to fill in and give us detail about what's really going on. Truth is now characterised, for Brandom, by the activity of claiming, in other words, making

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18 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce: Science and Philosophy and Reviews, Correspondence and Bibliography* (Harvard University Press, 1958), vols. 5, paragraphs 388–410.

19 Wright, *Truth and Objectivity; Saving the Differences: Essays on Themes from Truth and Objectivity* (Harvard University Press, 2003).

assertions.

After all this has been explored, our main claim concerning Brandom will be that the account of assertion that he offers us is more heavily invested in, and supported by a deflationary account of truth than might initially be apparent.

#### 1.1.4 A Dilemma for MacFarlane

Chapter Four contains our critical challenge to MacFarlane, and it builds on the claims that have already been made concerning MacFarlane's system, his response to Evans, and the details of Brandom's pragmatism. Our strategy is to pose a dilemma to MacFarlane, one which asks him to choose between a non-relative conception of truth, and a deflated conception of truth – which as we will show is also non-relative. The conclusion to be drawn from the dilemma is that relative truth as MacFarlane presents it, cannot adequately answer Evans' charge that it cannot provide a coherent account of the normative character of assertion. In particular we want to show that although it seems to provide an escape route for MacFarlane at first, once we examine it in detail, Brandom's commitment norm for assertion doesn't really provide the help that MacFarlane needs. In developing this criticism I have taken as my cue the suggestion by Manuel García-Carpintero that MacFarlane's resort to Brandom's 'more convoluted conception of the norms of assertion' places an 'extra burden on radical relativism'.<sup>20</sup> I want to explore in more detail what that extra burden might consist of.

The first horn of our dilemma concerns MacFarlane's attempt to avoid the Evans objection by offering us a different account of norms to the truth norm (assert only what is true) that Evans assumes. MacFarlane's replacement norm is one that he draws (or claims to draw) from Brandom's *magnum opus*, *Making it Explicit*.<sup>21</sup> The norm that Brandom thinks governs assertion is, in short, a

20 Manuel García-Carpintero, "Relativism, Vagueness and What Is Said," in *Relative Truth* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 148.

21 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*.



type of commitment. In making an assertion one does not aim to say something true, rather one commits to certain things such as justification of the assertion when challenged, retraction of the assertion if adequate justification is not provided, and taking responsibility for the assertion if someone else acts on it.

However, as we will show in Chapter Four, MacFarlane's articulation of Brandom's norm differs subtly from Brandom's articulation, in that it still contains explicit reference to truth, while Brandom's does not. Because of this, we find that it collapses back into a set of norms that is not significantly different from the truth norm that gave rise to Evans' objection, which it is necessary for MacFarlane to avoid if he is to maintain his thesis of assessment relative truth.

The second horn considers whether MacFarlane could avoid the problems of horn 1 by adjusting his version of the commitment norm so as to more closely follow Brandom's original view. However, building on our findings concerning Brandom in Chapter Three, we show why this is not possible. In essence, if MacFarlane were to adopt Brandom's 'truthless' commitment norms, this would push him in the direction of a deflated conception of truth, which is incompatible with the project of relative truth. Thus it seems that MacFarlane has only two options by which he can give an account of the norms of assertion, and those are, (1) give an account whereby an assertion is a type of aiming at truth, in which case the thing aimed at must be stable, and therefore not relative, or, (2) assertion is an activity whereby we make a commitment, but one which focusses on pragmatic ideas of justification and acceptability, rather than truth. This norm divorces the concept of assertion from any concept of truth other than a deflated one, and deflated truth cannot be understood as relative.

### **1.1.5 Thesis Outline**

In brief, then, the overview of our thesis is as follows. The remainder of Chapter One presents an overview of what relativism is (1.2), moving from a very general account of relativism, to the requirements of the particular form of truth relativism that we are concerned with in this thesis. We also discuss the motivations for relativism in 1.3, such as issues concerning faultless disagreement, and the disputes over content and context which give rise to a discussion of contextualism. We discuss contextualism since it is relativism's main rival theory, and a brief look at how the two theories deal with the same problems in different ways is instructive for highlighting some of the technical machinery that makes contemporary relativism interesting and compelling.

Our second chapter is an in depth analysis of John MacFarlane's system of assessment relative truth, dealing with his proposal for 'doubly contextual truth', that is, truth that is relative to both the context of utterance, and the context of assessment. The roots of such a theory are in Kaplan and Lewis, and as such, we investigate some of the concepts such as 'context' that MacFarlane draws on from those systems. We focus on one of MacFarlane's well known relativist solutions – to the problem of the truth value of assertions about future contingent events, and we also explore the range of other problems that MacFarlane's system can be applied to. We end the chapter by showing how the Evans problem challenges relativism.

Chapter Three is an investigation of Brandom's pragmatist philosophy, and since it is Brandom's account of assertion that MacFarlane draws on to escape Evans, our aim is to explain the moves and concepts that Brandom employs, building up to an explanation of his theory of assertion. Our main contention is that what underpins Brandom's whole system is an approach to several concepts, but most notably truth and meaning. He terms this approach 'phenomenalism', and it is, at its core, an anti-descriptive, performative analysis that focusses on activity rather than properties.

As we shall see, it is an approach that is heavily influenced by classical pragmatism, as well as later figures such as Wittgenstein. Following from this, our two key findings are first, that truth is not a real property for Brandom, but rather it is only an expressive device. Secondly, for Brandom, assertion is the linguistic activity *par excellence*, it is the activity that resides at the very heart of his theory of rationality, sapience, and the use of language and concepts.

In the final chapter, we develop the dilemma described above, in 1.1.4.

## 1.2 What is Relativism?

### 1.2.1 In General, What Sort of View is Relativism?

Although there were seeds of something like cultural relativism as far back as the Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484 BC – c. 425 BC) in his recognition of conflicting moral codes and customs,<sup>22</sup> specifically philosophical relativism can be traced back as far as Protagoras who famously claimed that what and whether things are or are not this way or that is in some sense dependent on Man's apprehension of them, that is, how he regards things, his perspective, his point of view. Man is 'the measure of all things'.<sup>23</sup> Since then, doctrines of relativism of one sort or another have been in the philosophical spotlight, but at the moment there seems even more reason to investigate issues surrounding this large family grouping of doctrines. As Paul Boghossian has recently noted, 'It is rare for a philosophical idea to command widespread acceptance in the broader intellectual community of the academy; philosophy, by its nature, tends towards claims of a scope and generality that invite controversy'.<sup>24</sup> His point is that among non-philosophical disciplines a

22 Maria Baghramian, "A Brief History of Relativism," in *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology*, ed. Michael Krausz (Columbia University Press, 2010).

23 Plato, *Plato, VII, Theaetetus. Sophist*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Loeb Classical Library, 1921), line 152a.

24 Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), vi.

certain hegemony has emerged, that knowledge is socially constructed, or that truth and knowledge are relative to a culture or conceptual scheme. In *Fear of Knowledge* he relates the story of the disagreement between the confirmed archaeological view that humans first entered the North American continent from Asia, across the Bering Strait some 10,000 years ago, and the Sioux creation myths, which relate the emergence of their ancestors from a subterranean spirit world. Boghossian quotes certain archaeologists' responses, which turn out to be classic examples of cultural relativism. One claims that 'Science is just one of many ways of knowing the world. [The Zunis' world view is] just as valid as the archaeological viewpoint of what prehistory is about', while another called for a 'different kind of science, between the boundaries of Western ways of knowing and Indian ways of knowing'.<sup>25</sup>

But at the same time as Boghossian notes this trend among other disciplines, something is happening within Philosophy too. Even though figures like Rorty, Putnam and Kuhn are widely discussed, not least for their relativistic elements, it has not generally been the case that relativism had any real foothold in academic philosophy, so much so that Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne write that 'the twentieth century saw it banished to the fringes of mainstream Analytic philosophy'.<sup>26</sup> Even famous examples such as Thomas Kuhn in the philosophy of science,<sup>27</sup> Richard Rorty,<sup>28</sup> and Nelson Goodman<sup>29</sup> concerning 'facts', and Gilbert Harman's moral relativism<sup>30</sup> have tended to be much discussed, yet not widely accepted. At least among analytic philosophers, relativism is famous as a paradoxical and self refuting position, as exemplified by the encounter between Socrates and Protagoras, and the view that 'all truth is relative' is a statement held to be as self defeating as 'nothing can be known' or the like. MacFarlane has written that 'analytic philosophers tend to regard relativism about truth as hopelessly confused, easily refuted, and even a

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25 Ibid., 1–2.

26 Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne, *Relativism and Monadic Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

27 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

28 Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

29 Nelson Goodman, *Ways Of Worldmaking* (Hackett, 1978).

30 Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *The Philosophical Review* 84, no. 1 (1975): 3–22.

sign of deficient intellectual character'.<sup>31</sup> This is certainly true, and there are few positions in philosophy that seem to excite such emotional responses as relativism.

And yet, in current philosophy of language, there have been quite a few philosophers who are willing to risk such charges, and resurrect this seemingly indefensible philosophy. Chief among those are MacFarlane and Max Kölbel. Granted, what is being attempted at the moment is not the grand global relativism of Protagoras, that Man is the measure of all things, nor even, that all true descriptions obtain only within a given conceptual scheme. It is the more sober idea that we could make room in our idea of truth for the notion that a proposition might be true relative to some assessor-based factor. My investigations here do not concern the more traditional, 'heady and exotic' doctrines (to paraphrase Donald Davidson<sup>32</sup>) of Kuhn and paradigm shifts, nor worldmaking and factual constructivism. I am interested in seeing whether the idea that what it means for a proposition to be true or false might admit of some sort of relativisation to an assessor, or some similar parameter. The pay-off that a viable version of such a relativism can give us will become clear in the course of this chapter, however, the worry is that the technical and theoretical complications and concessions that may be necessary to make such a picture coherent make the victory a pyrrhic one.

### 1.2.2 Requirements of Relativism: Additional Relationality, Equal Validity

As we shall see in a moment, many different viewpoints are called 'relativist'. However, I think that a good foundational claim that can anchor our understanding of what relativism really is is Crispin Wright's 'basic indicator' of folk-relativism, which is the idiom that 'there is no such thing as simply being  $\Phi$ '. He regards this idiom as 'gesturing at a kind of proto-

31 MacFarlane, "Making Sense of Relative Truth," 321.

32 Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, ed. Donald Davidson, vol. 47 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 183–198.

ground-level relativism'.<sup>33</sup> In the same vein, Robert Nozick writes that 'no statement, the (total) relativist says, has the traditional truth value of true simpliciter or false simpliciter'.<sup>34</sup> Of all the views called relativist, Boghossian states that it is the ones defined by something like the above principle that he is interested in:

the term "relativism" has, of course, been used in a bewildering variety of senses ... what interests me is the notion that is characterized by the following core idea: the relativist about a given domain, D, purports to have discovered that the truths of D involve an unexpected relation to a parameter.<sup>35</sup>

The relativist's discovery about truth is related to us by Nozick as being of the same order as Einstein's discovery about motion. Pre-Einstein, everybody spoke correctly – or so they thought – about motion, in an absolute sense, not in relation to anything else. And even though that was how it seemed to previous thinkers, that does not change the fact that really, despite appearances, motion turned out to be a relative term. Wright has thus called the 'no such thing as simply being  $\Phi$ ' a 'thesis about tacit additional relationality'.<sup>36</sup>

Along with the thesis about tacit additional relationality, or the denial that there is such a thing as being true or false simpliciter, is another commonly held 'hallmark' of relativism. Perhaps it can even be seen as a consequence of the first. We have already encountered it from Boghossian's archaeologists. Wright puts it as the idea that 'there is, or need be, no sense in the idea of the superiority of the assessments constrained by one value of V over those of any other'.<sup>37</sup> Nozick elaborates, claiming that

33 Crispin Wright, "Relativism About Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts About the Very Idea," in *Relative Truth*, ed. Manuel García-Carpintero and Max Kölbel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 158.

34 Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Belknap Press, 2001), 20.

35 Paul Boghossian, "What Is Relativism?," in *Truth and Realism*, ed. Patrick Greenough and Michael Lynch (Clarendon Press, 2006), 13.

36 Wright, "Relativism About Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts About the Very Idea," 159.

37 *Ibid.*, 162.

we have to add that no one of these different values is privileged, or superior to the others. They all are on a par, equally valid, or equally good, or whatever. If one of these values, say  $F_a$ , of the factor was privileged or superior, then the state of  $P$  relative to  $F_a$  could be picked out as defining the freestanding and nonrelative property. Relativism must be egalitarian about the variations in the factor  $F$ <sup>38</sup>

and finally, Boghossian characterises the view that

especially within the academy, but also and inevitably to some extent outside of it, the idea that there are ‘many equally valid ways of knowing the world’, with science being just one of them, has taken very deep root. In vast stretches of the humanities and social sciences, this sort of ‘postmodernist relativism’ about knowledge has achieved the status of orthodoxy. I shall call it (as neutrally as possible) the doctrine of Equal Validity: There are many radically divergent, yet ‘equally valid’ ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them.<sup>39</sup>

Between these two basic ideas of *tacit additional relationality* and *equal validity* we have the beginnings of what sort of view Relativism might be.

### 1.2.3 A Taxonomy of Relativisms

We can enumerate many theories and positions that can be called ‘relativism’. Maria Baghramian delineates at least the following: Epistemic Relativism, Conceptual Relativism, Cultural Relativism, Moral Relativism, Relativism about Truth, Social Constructivism, Postmodernism, Nietzschean Perspectivism, and Ontological Relativism.<sup>40</sup> Similarly Susan Haack has presented a sort of ‘mix and match’ list of what sorts of things might be relative to what factors:

38 Nozick, *Invariances*, 18.

39 Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge : Against Relativism and Constructivism*, 2.

40 Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (Routledge, 2004); Maria Baghramian, “The Many Faces of Relativism” (Forthcoming).

- (1) Meaning is relative to (a) language
- (2) Reference is relative to (b) conceptual schemes
- (3) Truth is relative to (c) theory
- (4) Metaphysical commitment is relative to (d) scientific paradigm
- (5) Ontology is relative to (e) version, depiction, description
- (6) Reality is relative to (f) culture
- (7) Epistemic values are relative to (g) community
- (8) Moral values are relative to (h) individual
- (9) Aesthetic values are relative to (i) historical periods <sup>41</sup>

As you can see, there are many available interesting theories here which we can generate simply by mixing and matching, and probably most of them have been held at some point by some thinker or other, or are held now. Perhaps one of the most prevalent and naturally occurring forms of relativism (in that it is the most likely one to be happened upon by non-philosophers) is Moral Relativism, but among those types of relativism concerning morality we might find (8) matched with (f),(g),(h), or (i).

Comparatively recent volumes on relativism from Paul O'Grady (2002)<sup>42</sup> and Baghramian (2004)<sup>43</sup> both recognise *alethic* relativism, that is, relativism about truth. On Baghramian's scheme, above, we might represent this as (3) pairing with *any* of the letters, particularly, perhaps, (b), (c), or (f). In particular, O'Grady considers the relativisation of truth to an artificial language (true-in-L),<sup>44</sup> to a particular logical system,<sup>45</sup> and also truth relative to a 'framework' such as the language of the Hopi Indians.<sup>46</sup> However even in the ten years or less since these volumes we have seen a new form

41 Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 149.

42 Paul O'Grady, *Relativism* (Acumen Publishing Ltd, 2002).

43 Baghramian, *Relativism*.

44 O'Grady, *Relativism*, 32.

45 *Ibid.*, 33.

46 *Ibid.*, 35–8.



of relativism about truth emerge, which following Wright we might refer to as ‘new-age relativism’<sup>47</sup>, which is characterised by writings which emerged independently of one another within a short period from philosophers such as Max Kölbel, John MacFarlane, Mark Richard, and Peter Lasersohn.<sup>48</sup> All of these New Relativists have something in common which sets them apart from previous relativists, it is the focus on the semantic (sub-sentential) operation of the truth predicate. Accordingly ‘new age relativism’ may also be styled as ‘truth relativism’. The machinery, as we shall learn in Chapter Two, is derived mainly from philosophers such as David Lewis and David Kaplan, who introduced the idea of relativising the truth of a given proposition to a circumstance of evaluation.<sup>49</sup>

It is this new relativism which is the topic of this thesis, rather than the old and well worn relativisms such as Conceptual, Ontological, Epistemic, Moral and Aesthetic relativisms, although as we shall see, much of new relativism is motivated by attempts to solve epistemic issues, such as the variation and propriety of making assertions concerning epistemic modals such as ‘he could be in Boston at the moment’, and particularly to explain the ‘shiftiness’ in standards for knowledge attribution. Aesthetic affairs are also prominent among the problems that New Relativism claims to provide a solution for, namely disputes concerning matters of taste, that is ‘beautiful’, ‘tasty’, ‘funny’ and so on.

The key to the new relativism is that it attempts to work some idea of ‘Context’ (MacFarlane) ‘Perspective’ (Kölbel) or cognate ideas into the operation of the truth predicate at a semantic level, though at the same time leaving the normal surface structure of the language intact. It is thus a thesis about the truth conditions of utterances. Later, in section 2.4.1 we will see that

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47 Crispin Wright, “New Age Relativism and Epistemic Possibility: The Question of Evidence,” *Philosophical Issues* 17, no. 1 (2007): 262–283.

48 Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*; MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth”; Mark Richard, “Contextualism and Relativism,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 119, No. 1/2, Contextualism in Epistemology and Beyond (2004): 215–242; Lasersohn, “Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste.”

49 David Lewis, “Index, Context, and Content,” in *Papers in Philosophical Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); David Kaplan et al., *Themes from Kaplan* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

MacFarlane himself caused some confusion over what exactly he intended when he discussed utterances, whether it was the content of what was said (which we might call the proposition), or the saying of it. We will leave further elaboration of that topic until then. Wright has it that ‘an utterance is an actual historical voicing or inscription of a sentence of a certain type’.<sup>50</sup>

The general thesis of new-age relativism is that, for certain areas of discourse, whether such an utterance is true or not depends on more than just the meaning of the utterance, and the state of the world when it is made. It also depends on a context of assessment, and this is why MacFarlane sometimes refers to the type of relativism he proposes as simply ‘assessment sensitivity’.<sup>51</sup>

The non-relativist picture already has certain shiftable parameters. Take a simple utterance: ‘it is raining’. The truth conditions for this utterance depend on the context of its utterance, which include the speaker, when it is made, what language it is in, and perhaps many other features of context. The context of utterance provides the details for filling in what the utterance means. Whether it is true or not depends further on the state of the world. If my utterance was made at a particular time, date, and location, was it actually raining then and there?

New-age relativism makes the truth of an utterance depend on not only the context of that utterance, the world of that utterance, but also the context of the assessment of that utterance. It is thus relativism because if we vary the context of assessment, the truth value of the utterance may change, even though the state of the world and the context of utterance have not changed, thus it displays Wright’s idea of ‘tacit additional relationality’ discussed above, perhaps even unexpected additional relationality.

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50 Wright, “New Age Relativism and Epistemic Possibility: The Question of Evidence,” 262.

51 As he does in the title of his manuscript: *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*, and also in the earlier paper ‘The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions’ (2005)

### 1.2.4 What are the Requirements of Truth Relativism? Kölbel versus MacFarlane

We can get straight in to our first disagreement in the area merely by trying to give some conditions for what things will count as relativist. We are already in the vicinity with the above mentioned ideas; ‘there is no such thing as simply being  $\Phi$ ’, and ‘of the different ways of understanding  $\Phi$ , no one way is privileged’. To make this more precise, Kölbel has suggested that

A relativism is not tame, if it involves the claim that the truth of propositions (or contents) of some kind can be relative, i.e. Has the form:

(RP) For any  $x$  that is a proposition of a certain kind  $K$ , it is relative to  $P$  whether  $x$  is true.<sup>52</sup>

However MacFarlane has pointed out that this is far too loose and wide a definition,<sup>53</sup> for

by this criterion, just about everyone who uses propositions in formal semantics would count as a non-tame relativist. For it is standard practice to relativise proposition truth to a circumstance of evaluation: typically a possible world, but in some frameworks a world and a time, or even a world and a standard of precision. The proposition that dodos are extinct in 2004 is true in the actual world, but there are possible worlds relative to which the very same proposition is false. Surely that does not vindicate relativism in any interesting sense.<sup>54</sup>

This appears to be a fair point, so maybe we need more to define the sort of relativism we're after. Nozick suggests that the parameter needs to be an unexpected one in order to qualify as

52 Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*, 119.

53 However, on Kölbel's previous page, 118, he lists 3 requirements for genuine relativism, (R1) For any  $x$  that is an  $I$ , it is relative to  $P$  whether  $x$  is  $F$ . (R2) There is no uniquely relevant way  $P_i$  of fixing  $P$ . (R3) For some  $x$  that are  $I$ , and for some  $P_i, P_j$ ,  $x$  is  $F$  in relation to  $P_i$  but not  $F$  in relation to  $P_j$ . These three requirements echo the precept ‘no such thing as simply being  $\Phi$ ’ that we have already seen, above. Regarding MacFarlane's counterexample to Kölbel, it would seem that given the addition of (R2) and (R3), MacFarlane's point still holds, since the proposition about Dodos could be true in one possible world, false in another (R3), and presumably (R2), there is no unique way of fixing  $P$  would not change things either. So MacFarlane's challenge to Kölbel is still to the point. *Ibid.*, 118.

54 MacFarlane, “Making Sense of Relative Truth,” 307.

relativism, in short, he wants to rule out times and worlds.<sup>55</sup> However MacFarlane shows that this is also inadequate by the following example. Suppose we relativised propositional truth to an aesthetic standard. MacFarlane argues that this would probably make us aesthetic relativists, but not truth-relativists. Why? Because ‘it’s not the kind of parameter that matters, but how it’s treated’.<sup>56</sup> If we thought that the extension of ‘beautiful’ was relative not just to a time and a world, but also to an aesthetic standard, then we could say that ‘Helen was beautiful at the beginning of the Trojan War’ had a truth value that varied not just with world but also with aesthetic standard. MacFarlane suggests that this alone would not make us truth-relativists. What he means by the statement that it’s not the kind of parameter but how its used can be illustrated by looking at a couple of ways the aesthetic standard parameter could be employed.

Aesthetic absolutism: S is true at a context of use C iff there is a proposition P such that

- (a) S expresses P at C, and
- (b) P is true at the world of C and the One True Aesthetic Standard.

The truth of P, MacFarlane writes, ‘is no more ‘relative’ than the truth of any other tensed claim’.<sup>57</sup>

Aesthetic contextualism: S is true at a context of use C iff there is a proposition p such that

- (a) S expresses p at C, and
- (b) p is true at the world of C and the aesthetic standards of the speaker at C.

This drops the one aesthetic standard, and so there could be more than one aesthetic standard, as required by the sort of proto-relativism we saw from Wright, Nozick et. al. But as

<sup>55</sup> Nozick, *Invariances*, 19 fn.7.

<sup>56</sup> MacFarlane, “Making Sense of Relative Truth,” 308.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

MacFarlane points out, this is not enough for truth relativism since ‘this is a kind of relativism about beauty, perhaps, but not about truth. There is always an absolute answer to the question, “Is S true at C?” or “Did A utter S truly?”’.<sup>58</sup> All that is done here is vary the meaning of ‘Helen was beautiful at the start of the Trojan war’ from speaker to speaker, but the truth of the sentence, once that meaning is fixed does not vary, hence this is not relativism (later on we will look at how this sort of contextualism and genuine relativism differ in more detail).

So then, if it is true that it is not the *type* of parameter but *how* it is treated, how does it need to be treated in order to yield *bona fide* relativism? MacFarlane suggests the following as being of the shape that the relativist is really after, making use of both a context of use ( $C_U$ ), and of assessment ( $C_A$ ), rather than simply a context of use as in the previous example:

Aesthetic relativism: S is true at a context of use  $C_U$  and context of assessment  $C_A$  iff there is a proposition p such that

- (a) S expresses p at  $C_U$ , and
- (b) p is true at the world of  $C_U$  and the aesthetic standards of the assessor at  $C_A$ .<sup>59</sup>

This is genuine relativism, because, the meaning of the expression will of course vary with the context of use, however the truth of what is said will be relative to both contexts, hence the same content will take different truth values in different contexts. This example of the shape that relativism might take raises many difficult questions, and for the moment we have gotten slightly ahead of ourselves. MacFarlane's proposal is discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

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58 Ibid., 309.

59 Ibid.

### 1.3 Faultless Disagreement: A Motivation for Relativism

#### 1.3.1 De Gustibus Non Disputandum Est

What do people mean when they dismiss an argument about taste with the well known phrase - *de gustibus non disputandum est*, or ‘there's no disputing about taste’? Whatever the truth that the aphorism gets at is, as Andy Egan points out, it is certainly not that there's no disputing about taste. Rather,

There's heaps of disputing about taste. People engage in disputes about which movies, music, paintings, literature, meals, furniture, architectural styles, etc. are good, beautiful, tasty, fun, elegant, ugly, disgusting, etc. all the time. This is obvious to anyone who has watched dueling-movie-critics shows, read theatre reviews, or negotiated with a group or partner about which movie or restaurant to go to, or which sofa or painting to put in the living room. It takes great care and good aim to fling a brick without hitting somebody who's engaged in a dispute about taste.<sup>60</sup>

Egan suggests that the truth in the aphorism is that there is no sensible or worthwhile disputing about taste. We could put it another way, there is no resolving disputes about taste, and hence, there is no point to the dispute.

We are therefore presented with an interesting phenomenon that has two key features. Firstly, disputes about taste are possible, they happen all the time. On the surface, if you and I have the following dispute (1)

(1a) ‘Roller-coasters are fun’

(1b) ‘Roller-coasters are not fun’

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<sup>60</sup> Andy Egan, “Disputing About Taste,” in *Disagreement*, ed. Ted Warfield and Richard Feldman (Oxford University Press, 2010), 247.

it seems to have the same structure as this dispute (2)

(2a) 'Roller-coasters are dangerous'

(2b) 'Roller-coasters are not dangerous'

Hence it looks like an ordinary dispute. However the second feature is this: suppose that as a continuation of dispute (2) I claim that lots of people are killed on roller-coasters. You deny this, we adjourn to Wikipedia or some other source of evidence, where it turns out that not many people at all are killed on roller-coasters, and so I admit that I was mistaken in saying that they were very dangerous. However there is no such resolution in (1). We have a genuine dispute, yet it does not appear to be resolvable. In other words it would seem uncharitable to conclude that a mistake has been made every time there is a disagreement (and thus, Wright's principle of cognitive command cannot apply).<sup>61</sup>

Some philosophers have suggested that this is a special type of dispute; it is a case of 'faultless disagreement'. We are genuinely having a disagreement but at the same time neither of us is at fault. Kölbel has described this type of disagreement in the following way

Most people think that there can be faultless disagreements at least on some topics, for example on matters of taste. They believe that there is a difference between disputes on objective matters of fact and disputes on non-objective matters of opinion. When two thinkers disagree on a non-objective matter of opinion it is possible that neither of them has made a mistake or is at fault. It is possible that even though they disagree, giving up the

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61 'A discourse exhibits Cognitive Command if and only if it is a priori that differences of opinion arising within it can be satisfactorily explained only in terms of "divergent input", that is, the disputants working on the basis of different information (and hence guilty of ignorance or error ...), or "unsuitable conditions" (resulting in inattention or distraction and so in inferential error, or oversight of data, and so on), or "malfunction" (for example, prejudicial assessment of data ... or dogma, or failings in other categories already listed)' Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, 92.

belief in question would be an improvement for neither of them. Let's call such disagreements faultless.

He goes on to suggest the following domains where these disagreements tend to arise: 'aesthetic, culinary or moral value, probability, justification of beliefs, and many others'.<sup>62</sup>

Contemporary relativists tend to argue that some doctrine of relative truth is better equipped to explain this phenomenon than any other theory. It should therefore be held up as good motivation, they suggest, for adopting relativism about truth.

### 1.3.2 Faultless Disagreement: Relativism Versus Contextualism

Both Kölbel<sup>63</sup> and MacFarlane<sup>64</sup> use the putative phenomenon of faultless disagreement to motivate relativism about truth. The reason that it is supposed to be motivating is that among the taxonomy of answers, relativism supposedly fares the best. To one side of the spread of positions is objectivism, the idea that such disputes are to be categorised alongside any other disputes. Now clearly, objectivism loses the intuition that such disputes are really faultless, rather, it sticks to the position that where there is disagreement there is fault. If that was the case, it would mean that where there is a dispute that is widespread, many many people are necessarily wrong-headed, this seems to place a very heavy burden on the objectivist to explain why we are justified in attributing mass error to the population. MacFarlane therefore begins<sup>65</sup> by dismissing the objectivist, and also the philosopher who does not think that statements about what is funny or likely are candidates for truth or falsity at all. Objectivism is dismissed since it must hold that in cases where statements clash wildly, there is indeed one true standard which can be met, but the majority of people will

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62 Max Kölbel, "Faultless Disagreement," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104, no. 1 (2004): 53.

63 Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*; "Faultless Disagreement."

64 MacFarlane, "Relativism and Disagreement"; MacFarlane, "Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications."

65 MacFarlane, "Relativism and Disagreement."



simply be wrong about roller-coasters, liquorice, and how likely some event in the future or unknown event in the present really is, and MacFarlane finds this implausible. As far as he is concerned then, there are only two possibilities that can explain Faultless Disagreement, and those are Contextualism and Relativism.

We might imagine an example involving ‘Sam’ and ‘Sal’, and possible disagreements they could have. The intuition that this example is trying to exercise is that the statement ‘hen-of-the-woods (a mushroom) is poisonous’ is of a different type to ‘hen-of-the-woods is tasty’. It is likely that the first sentence will be taken by most people as an objective statement about the world that Sam and Sal disagree about. Furthermore, at most one of them is getting it right.

Sam concedes that Hen-of-the-Woods is not poisonous, however, he will not accept that it is tasty. Their disagreement over whether or not it is tasty appears, on the surface, to share a lot with their initial disagreement over whether it is poisonous. And yet, we are hesitant to say either of the two things that were said about the initial disagreement. It does not seem that they are making objective claims, neither does it appear that their disagreement necessitates at least one of them to be at fault. The intuitions that there is no ‘fact of the matter’, that their responses are ‘subjective’, and other likely responses might be referred to as ‘the intuition of deficient objectivity’.<sup>66</sup>

MacFarlane offers us the following principle to guide the use of ‘tasty’: ‘TP: If you know first-hand how something tastes, call it “tasty” just in case its taste is pleasing to you, and “not tasty” just in case its taste is not pleasing to you’.<sup>67</sup>

All the same, with this guide in hand we must still account for this seeming case of faultless disagreement. We should look at the response that a contextualist might give first.

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66 This example regarding Hen-of-the-Woods appeared in an earlier draft of MacFarlane, “Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications.” but does not currently appear. It is a clear example though, so I have chosen to keep it.

67 *Ibid.*, 4.

### 1.3.2.1 The Contextualist Response to Faultless Disagreement

The contextualist response is that ‘tasty’ is a contextually determined word. The oft used comparators are ‘local’, ‘tall’, ‘rich’ and the like. In Mark Richard’s much discussed example, Didi and Naomi may disagree over whether a certain person is ‘rich’, when Didi has in mind ‘rich for a New Yorker’ and Naomi has some other context-set variable that affects the meaning of ‘rich’.<sup>68</sup>

Kölbel calls this type of contextualism ‘revisionism’ because ‘Didi is rich’ gets revised to mean ‘Didi is rich for a New Yorker’. Similarly, what ‘Tony is tall’ really expresses is ‘Tony is tall for an eight year old’. Furthermore, adjectives like ‘tasty’ seem to be similar to the others because they can be explicitly relativised, something which is very hard for the objectivist to explain as MacFarlane points out:

Is “tasty” context-sensitive in the same sense [as tall, local etc.]? Are utterances of “Hen-of-the-Woods is tasty” generally understood as assertions that Hen-of-the-Woods tastes good to the speaker? In favor of this hypothesis, it might be noted that “tasty,” like “local” and “ready,” can occur in explicitly relativized form. I can characterize a food as “tasty for teenagers” or as “tasty for me.” It is natural to suppose that when such relativizations are not explicitly supplied, the relevant experiencer or standard is supplied by context. Indeed, as Lasersohn (2005, p. 656) points out, it is difficult to see how the objectivist can explain the explicitly relativized forms. With paradigm objective predicates, like “five feet tall,” we have no similar explicitly relativized forms; we do not say that someone is “five feet tall to me,” or “five feet tall for a teenager.” So it is difficult to see how these relativizing phrases could be dealt with on an objectivist account<sup>69</sup>

Thus, we have a type of revisionism because the surface meaning does not turn out to be a good guide to the real meaning of the sentence, rather that gets revised to reveal hidden semantic content. Contextualism thus deals with our taste predicates as though they were something like

68 Richard, “Contextualism and Relativism.”

69 MacFarlane, “Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications,” 8.

gradeable adjectives, or some other incomplete term, where the full content is supplied by a context. In the case of 'rich', this is supplied by the socio-economic group in question. In the case of tall, we need to ask 'by which standards?' before we know what it means, in the case of 'local' we need to know 'to where?' and when we describe something as 'tasty', we need to know 'by whose standards of taste?' before we can supply content to the assertion.

The problem with this answer is that it explains the faultlessness only by losing the disagreement. Consider for instance how unlikely disagreements would be if the contextualist was correct? Unless we have completely misunderstood each other, it would be most unnatural (linguistically) for a disagreement about how tall Tony is to take place. As soon as the context is supplied, there is no more disagreement. Suppose you turn up to meet me, and you bring Tony with you. I might say 'I thought you said he was tall', and you might answer 'He *is* tall, for an eight year old'. Once context has been set, the disagreement vanishes.

But if taste predicates functioned like this, how would an argument ever start, unless it was down to a silly misunderstanding of the type above? If taste ascriptions were really incomplete predicates awaiting content supplied by context, how could I ever start an argument with you about whether something is tasty, or beautiful, unless for some reason I thought we were talking about my tastes exclusively, or something else? And like the example about how tall Tony is, I will no longer think that we really had any disagreement in the first place. But you and I may argue for as long as we like about whether some painting hanging in a gallery is beautiful or not. Now suppose a contextualist comes along and says, 'no need to argue, you mean it's beautiful to you, and he means it's beautiful to him'. Even if we acknowledge that we have different tastes, we will still say that we disagree over whether the picture is beautiful.

The contextualist thus fails to account for why people bother to argue over taste ascriptions, and why they still take themselves to be in disagreement even after the indexicality has been

unmasked. So the contextualist response to faultless disagreement explains the faultlessness, but loses the disagreement. The key issue here is that the contextualist alters the content of the statement at the sub-sentential level, so that the seeming contradiction  $(P, \sim P)$  becomes  $(P, \sim Q)$ , and hence there is no fault, but no disagreement either.

### 1.3.2.2 *The Relativist Alternative*

The relativist proposes a different solution. On the surface they look similar, so much so that until recently, many views that we would probably now call 'contextualist' may well have been described by the blanket 'relativist' label (as we will see later on). Obviously what is correct about contextualism is that it finds room for the intuition that something subjective, some individual gustatory standard has a role to play in ascriptions of taste. Applying it at the level of propositional content however yields disagreement lost.

For the relativist account the contextual element still plays a role, however not at the level of affecting propositional content. Our disagreeers still assert  $P, \sim P$  respectively, so they disagree. But the contextual element is introduced to the semantics of the truth predicate, so that  $P, \sim P$  can both be true, because there are two different contextual, or perspectival elements worked in to the statements at the semantic truth level.

Thus the relativist's analysis of what is going on in the cases of faultless disagreement (above) is something along the following lines, where (to use MacFarlane's terminology  $C_U$  is a context of use, and  $C_A$  is a context of assessment)

Sam's utterance of  $P$  is true at  $(C_U^1, C_A^1)$

Sal's utterance of  $\sim P$  is true at  $(C_U^1, C_A^2)$

The truth of their utterances is relativised to a double context, use, and utterance. Crucially,

relativism avoids contextualism's problems by stipulating that in each case, the context of use is the same. This gives disagreement, because if the context of use was different, the content of P would be different. However, as we can see, the context of assessment, to which the truth of P is also relative, is different in each case. In the current case concerning whether something is tasty, we include a standard of taste in the context of assessment, and the different standards yield different contexts. However the method should be broad enough to account for various different ways of introducing something 'subjective' or 'perspectival' in to the mix. So supposedly then, with the relativist solution we still have disagreement, but we retain the intuition that it is faultless, since neither party has said something incorrect. We will see the relativist's solution in more detail in Chapter Two.

### 1.3.3 Against Faultless Disagreement

The principal opponents to the idea of faultless disagreement are Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne in their book *Relativism and Monadic Truth*.<sup>70</sup> In their treatment of 'fun', they claim not to have 'the intuition of disagreement' for example, in the following case of a party.

Suppose a caterer says of a certain party 'That party is not going to be fun. I have to cook hors d'oeuvres all night.' Suppose that, meanwhile, someone in a separate conversation says of the same party 'That party is going to be fun. I get to meet lots of school buddies that I haven't seen in a long time.' In this case we have absolutely no strong sense at all that the people are in disagreement.<sup>71</sup>

It is tempting to try to disqualify this as a relevant case, since we might hold that 'the party' in this case has a different referent for each of the speakers, perhaps it is shorthand for 'catering at

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<sup>70</sup> Cappelen and Hawthorne, *Relativism and Monadic Truth*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

the party' and 'partying at the party'. The temptation is even stronger with respect to another example used by Cappelen and Hawthorne:

A child says 'The summer is going to be fun. I get to go to music camp.' A parent, in a separate conversation, says, 'The summer isn't going to be fun. I have to work overtime to pay for my child's music camp.'<sup>72</sup>

Here we might certainly respond that 'the summer' simply does not refer to the same thing, it's shorthand for 'music camp' on the one hand and 'working overtime' on the other, indeed it is itself somewhat surprising that Cappelen and Hawthorne claim to have found *this* response from their audience members surprising. However they respond with the consideration that if 'the party' and 'the summer' did not refer to the same things in each discussion the following exchanges would not seem natural:

it may be worth reflecting on the naturalness of such exchanges as the following: A: 'The party wasn't fun. I had to cook hors d'oeuvres all night. What did you think about it?' B: 'I loved it. Sorry it wasn't so good for you.' The idea that each is talking about a different event does not square with the co-referentiality secured by 'it'.

The same goes for the summer example, where

it would be altogether appropriate for the child to turn to the parent and say (exocentrically)<sup>73</sup> 'I know the summer won't be fun because you have to work such long hours, but it will be worth it'. If a little earlier the child had said 'The summer is going to be fun!', we would hardly think that this is evidence that he has changed his mind.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> The vocabulary of 'autocentric', 'exocentric' and 'acentric' are Lasersohn's, to describe different stances we can take when making assertions, from our own perspective, that of another, or no one's Lasersohn, "Relative Truth, Speaker Commitment, and Control of Implicit Arguments," 363.

<sup>74</sup> Cappelen and Hawthorne, *Relativism and Monadic Truth*, 109 fn. 14.

It sounds as though when a speaker says ‘that will be fun’, and another speaker responds ‘that will not be fun’, that they disagree. However Cappelen and Hawthorne deny that contextualism has any problem here, and they give three examples of predictions the contextualist might make about how this sort of conversation might come about, and what the disagreement might be.

(i) The speaker is using ‘fun’ autocentrically, the hearer realizes this, but exocentrically points out that the relevant event will not be fun for the original speaker.

(ii) The speaker is claiming that the referent of ‘that’ will be fun for a group that includes the interlocutor. While it will be fun for the speaker, it will not be fun for certain other members of the group. Here the interlocutor is quite within his rights to correct the speaker. Once corrected, the speaker will in that case not stick to his guns unless he feels the alleged counter-evidence is faulty.

(iii) The original speaker was in fact merely expressing the claim concerning the referent of ‘that’ that it will be fun for him. The interlocutor misunderstands the speaker and corrects him when it is not appropriate to do so.<sup>75</sup>

In (i), we are simply disagreeing over the facts. You might be unreliable, for example, you might always claim that you enjoy roller-coasters, but I know that you hate them. You appear to hate them while on them, and always admit to hating them afterwards, but, either you forget how much you hate them or you want to impress somebody, so you claim they are fun, and my disagreement has the content ‘no, you don’t think they are fun’. In (ii), the example seems to point to a case like the party, above. If I say ‘the party will be fun’ and you say ‘no it won’t, I have to wash the dishes’, I am unlikely to say ‘no, you’re wrong, it’s definitely going to be fun’, rather I will say ‘oh, I forgot that’, or I will specify further and say, ‘I didn’t mean for you, but it will be fun for

75 Ibid., 110–111.

me and my friends'. The last case is like the 'summer' example that Cappelen and Hawthorne claim is inappropriate, where the parent overhears the child saying 'summer is going to be fun!' and the parent remarks to a friend 'he's wrong about that you know', unless of course, unbeknownst to the child, he's really being sent to stay with his hated cousins rather than music camp, in which case we would all agree that he is wrong, it would revert to a version of something like (i).

This discussion concerning the existence of faultless disagreement could serve to undermine the motivation for advancing a theory of relative truth, however, it also provides some justification for our focus on MacFarlane, since, unlike some of the other contemporary relativists, MacFarlane does not focus exclusively on issues concerning taste predicates in order to motivate his position, rather, he applies it to a host of philosophical problems. We will get an overview of what those problems and solutions are in Chapter Two.

### **1.3.4 Relativism vs Contextualism: Strategies Concerning Content**

We have had an introductory taste of what is at stake between the contextualist and the relativist by looking at their respective accounts of taste disagreements. But perhaps we should look a little closer at what the real basis for the dispute is.

Francois Recanati has claimed that truth relativism has two main components, which he calls 'duality', and 'distribution'. Both ideas concern the question of what factors affect the content of a statement. However, it seems to be an open question as to whether certain parameters should be seen as part of the content of the utterance, or the context of the evaluation of a claim.

1. [Duality] To get a truth-value, we need a circumstance of evaluation as well as a content to evaluate.



(As Austin puts it, "It takes two to make a truth".)

2. [Distribution] The determinants of truth-value distribute over the two basic components truth-evaluation involves: content and circumstance. That is, a determinant of truth-value, e.g. a time, is either given as an ingredient of content or as an aspect of the circumstance of evaluation.<sup>76</sup>

These considerations lead Recanati to distinguish between two levels of content, one broad and one narrow, which he terms the 'lekton' and the 'Austinian proposition'. The Lekton is the thinner content, without the added circumstantial content that would make it a fully fledged 'Fregean'<sup>77</sup> proposition:

So 'It is raining' expresses a constant lekton whenever and wherever it is used, a content that can be modelled as a function from situations to truth-values or as a set of situations (viz. The set {s: it is raining in s}); but the complete content of an utterance of 'It is raining' is the Austinian proposition that a certain situation (that which the utterance/thought 'concerns') fits that lekton, i.e., belongs to the set of situations in question.<sup>78</sup>

In the following examples we can see that the disagreement between contextualism and relativism is one over where to place the situational elements that would serve to broaden the thin content of the *lekton*. Do we place them *within* the content of the utterance, as unannounced elements, or do we leave them out of the content of the utterance, rather adding them as a context of evaluation or assessment? Wright points out that what is interesting about truth relativism is that it operates after content has been fixed already. Contextualism as we understand it here, operates precisely with the result of fixing content. Wright says that

76 François Recanati, *Perspectival Thought: A Plea for Moderate Relativism* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), 33–34.

77 Frege would have viewed this *lekton* as incomplete. 'In all such cases the mere wording, as it is given in writing, is not the complete expression of the thought, but the knowledge of certain accompanying conditions of utterance, which are used as means of expressing the thought, are needed for its correct apprehension. The pointing of fingers, hand movements, glances may belong here too. The same utterance containing the word "I" will express different thoughts in the mouths of different men, of which some may be true, others false.' Gottlob Frege, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry," *Mind* 65, no. 259, New Series (1956): 296.

78 Recanati, *Perspectival Thought*, 46.

truth-relativism becomes potentially interesting only when the truth-value bearers are conceived as beliefs, or as thoughts (one use of “proposition”, which I shall stick by here), or – as more commonly in the contemporary literature – as utterances, but where the historical context of the utterance (by whom, when and where it is made, and in what collateral circumstances), and the semantics of the language, are fixed; in short, when everything is fixed which is normally conceived as sufficient to fix an utterance's content.<sup>79</sup>

We shall take this to be the defining difference between contextualism and relativism, the idea that for the contextualist, context serves to fix the content of what is said. Relativism, on the other hand, fixes what is said first, and then relativises the truth of what is said to further context. Context therefore has two roles, as we shall see when we go in to the details of MacFarlane's ‘double context’ in Chapter Two.

Relativism is thus the more radical thesis of the two, as voiced by Timothy Williamson who claims that ‘contextualism is relativism tamed’.<sup>80</sup> In the same vein, Arthur Fine writes that “contextualism” [is] a handy pseudonym for relativism when you would rather keep a low profile’.<sup>81</sup> Why is Relativism more radical? Well according to Williamson, we need to imagine that we want to defuse a situation of seemingly faultless disagreement, where we have two parties that are intelligent, alert, etc., and yet they disagree over whether P. The relativist claims to solve it by saying that P is true-for X, and  $\sim$ P is true-for Y. Yet when we ask the relativist what ‘true-for’ is supposed to mean, according to Williamson, ‘wild relativists bluster incoherently’.<sup>82</sup> Not so, for the tamer contextualist. As we have seen, the disagreement over whether P or  $\sim$ P is solved by revealing hidden semantic content. And instead of saying for example “Síle is more beautiful than Gráinne”

79 Wright, “Relativism About Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts About the Very Idea,” 163.

80 Williamson, “Knowledge, Context and the Agent’s Point of View,” in *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth*, ed. Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 91.

81 Arthur Fine, “Relativism, Pragmatism, and the Practice of Science,” in *New Pragmatists*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), 65.

82 Williamson, “Knowledge, Context and the Agent’s Point of View,” 91.

is true-for-X' we say 'Síle is more beautiful-by-X's-standards than Gráinne'. This is not in conflict with 'Síle is not more beautiful-by-Y's-standards than Gráinne'. Furthermore, they are both absolutely true, there is no need to explain the mysterious 'incoherent bluster' of what 'true-for' is supposed to mean.

Contextualists, by contrast, have a clear answer. A sentence is true for X if and only if it is true as uttered by X, true relative to a context in which X is the speaker. Such relativism is tame because the relativity to context in the truth-value of a sentence allows for absoluteness in the truth-value of what the sentence is used to say in a given context. When she says 'P', she speaks truly: not just truly for her, but absolutely truly. When he says 'Not P', he too speaks truly: not just truly for him, but absolutely truly.<sup>83</sup>

The question at issue between relativism and contextualism then, is not whether context provides important information, it is rather where we should fit such contextually supplied information in to our picture. This gives rise to an interesting structural point, noticed by Wright, that wherever there is space for contextualism there must be space for relativism, and vice-versa.

This reflection – that any interesting truth-relativism operates after content is fixed – signals one major strategic line of resistance to it: that of (what I propose we here and now decide standardly to call) Contextualism. Contextualism, where philosophically contentious, is the thesis of some (interesting and unobvious) relativity of content. Whenever there is a case for truth-relativism – whatever form such a case may assume – there has to be a theoretical space in principle for a corresponding and opposed contextualism: a thesis to the effect that the additional parameter to which the truth-relativist contends that truth is relative, is actually something variation in which leads to variation in truth-conditional content, with the resulting variable propositions then taking their truth-values in some unremarkable, non-relativistic manner.<sup>84</sup>

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83 Ibid.

84 Wright, "Relativism About Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts About the Very Idea," 163–4.

### 1.3.4.1 Knowledge Attributions

To gain more detail of the difference between relativism and contextualism, let's look at a particular case, the much discussed case of knowledge attribution. The traditional view of whether you know something could be described, after Peter Unger,<sup>85</sup> as invariantism, that is, what it means to attribute knowledge to someone *does not* change with context. Of course, whether you know that P depends on various features of both you, and the situation you are in. There are disputes in epistemology over whether knowing depends on what other beliefs you hold, on certain counterfactuals holding of you, on what evidence you have, and on the origins of your belief. Whether these factors feed in to whether or not you know, the traditional position still holds that they do not affect the meaning of 'S knows that P', that is, the meaning of 'knows' is invariant. So once we have agreed on what knowledge means, for instance, some sort of, as Rysiew puts it, 'ungettiered justified true belief'. This general, invariantist position is what Rysiew calls the 'ho-hum position', precisely because it is not particularly interesting or adventurous.<sup>86</sup>

The contextualist and the relativist both agree that invariantism is deficient, in that it does not take account of certain data. Here are two simple, but much discussed examples of such data: one that concerns shifting standards, and one that concerns the importance of what is at stake.

### 1.3.4.2 MacFarlane's Car

It seems that context has a bearing on whether we say we know or not, in that, there are different standards of knowledge attribution that need to be met in different circumstances. To take an example discussed by MacFarlane<sup>87</sup>, suppose I ask you where your car is, and you say 'it's around the corner in the car park'. I say 'how do you know?' and you say 'I just parked it there'. I think

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85 Peter Unger, *Philosophical Relativity* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2002).

86 Patrick Rysiew, "Speaking of Knowing," *Noûs* 41, no. 4 (2007): 627–662.

87 MacFarlane, "The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions."

under normal circumstances we would accept that you know where your car is. But suppose that something about our conversational context sets the bar a little higher, suppose you stumble in to a discussion on how a particularly ruthless band of car thieves have been operating in the area. We might be less inclined to say that you know where your car is, for it seems that the bar has been raised by the context of the discussion, namely that it is about car theft in the area. At the very least, it seems that there are some things that you are willing to say you know under normal circumstances, for instance, that you are not now dreaming, that you have hands, that your head is not made of glass, that you are not a brain-in-a-vat and all the rest of the Cartesian style hypotheses, which you will nonetheless deny knowledge of once you sit down in the epistemology seminar and begin to take the sceptical hypothesis seriously.

### **1.3.4.3 Brown's Surgeon**

Another style of example that features widely in the literature is that of Jessica Brown's 'surgeon' case:

A student is spending the day shadowing a surgeon. In the morning he observes her in clinic examining patient A who has a diseased left kidney. The decision is taken to remove it that afternoon. Later, the student observes the surgeon in theatre where patient A is lying anaesthetised on the operating table. The operation hasn't started as the surgeon is consulting the patient's notes. The student is puzzled and asks one of the nurses what's going on:

Student: I don't understand. Why is she looking at the patient's records? She was in clinic with the patient this morning. Doesn't she even know which kidney it is?

Nurse: Of course, she knows which kidney it is. But, imagine what it would be like if she removed the wrong kidney. She shouldn't operate before checking the patient's records.<sup>88</sup>

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88 Jessica Brown, "Subject-Sensitive Invariantism and the Knowledge Norm for Practical Reasoning," *Noûs* 42, no. 2 (2008): 176.

This, and several similar examples are supposed to motivate the idea that the standards of knowledge can shift based on how serious the practical consequences of whether you know or not are, as well as based on the other contextual factors such as whether we are in a philosophy seminar or somewhere else. Brown sums up the contextualist position elsewhere:

According to contextualism, the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor's context. Contextualists support their view by appeal to cases such as third-person versions of the bank and airport cases, which show that whether an attribution of knowledge seems correct depends on attributor factors.<sup>89</sup>

Similar to the 'surgeon' case above, the 'airport' case<sup>90</sup> is one where we are told that Smith has a true belief that his flight stops in Chicago, because his itinerary says so. Suppose now that in one context it is not important to John and Mary whether the flight stops in Chicago, it seems correct for them to attribute knowledge to Smith. But suppose that in a different context it is very important to John and Mary whether the flight stops in Chicago, and in which Mary raises the possibility that the itinerary has a typed error, it seems incorrect for them to attribute knowledge to Smith. The intuitions concerning whether knowledge attribution is correct or not in this case seems to depend on the attributor's context. Again the 'bank' case<sup>91</sup> is one where it seems right under normal circumstances to say that someone 'knows' that the bank opens on Saturday, but incorrect when, despite good evidence that it does, something important like their mortgage repayment rides on their ability to lodge a check on Saturday.

We can sum up the basic contextualist strategy regarding all these cases in the following way. A tokening of a knowledge sentence such as 'Smith knows he has hands', 'Smith knows the

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89 Jessica Brown, "Adapt or Die: The Death of Invariantism?," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 219 (2005): 263.

90 Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons," *Noûs* 33 (1999): 57–89.

91 Keith DeRose, "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 4 (1992): 913–929.

plane lands in Chicago', or 'the surgeon knows which kidney to remove' will express a different proposition depending on the context that it is uttered, because of conversational standard raising/lowering, or the practical consequences of the situation. In other words, 'knows' contains a hidden context dependence, a result of which is that tokenings of a given sentence in different contexts may result in different truth values.

#### **1.3.4.4 The Relativist Alternative**

Why might the relativist be unhappy with the contextualist's account? Well, she might have reason to reject the thesis of hidden content precisely because it is a revisionist account, as we saw earlier with predicates of taste. The strength of contextualism is that it explains a disagreement over taste or knowledge by rewriting the content of a claim, so that it is no longer at odds with what seems to be an opposing claim made at a different context. The Sceptic may tell G.E. Moore: 'you don't know you have hands', and Moore may claim 'I know I have hands'. For the contextualist, as we have seen, these claims are not in conflict, because 'know' has a different extension in each case. Rather than it being a case of  $P, \sim P$ , it is rather a case of  $P, \sim Q$ . The argument is diffused. And yet this is precisely the problem. Suppose you walk in on the debate and ask me what's going on? It is not open to me to respond 'well, Moore and the Sceptic are arguing over whether Moore knows he has hands'. What epistemic relation am I talking about when I describe argument to you in this way? It seems that the contextualist is committed to the notion that when I (a third person) describe the argument to you, it is my standard of 'knows' that fixes the content of my description of the argument, so we have the Sceptic asserting ' $\sim Q$ ', Moore asserting ' $P$ ', and me describing the whole thing as 'they disagree over whether  $R$ '. There are two obvious problems here: disagreement is lost: Moore and the Sceptic aren't actually disagreeing, and secondly, this

description of events doesn't seem to capture anything about what is going on here, it can't explain why anyone is asserting these things unless everyone is massively mistaken about what sort of claims they are making. Furthermore, they certainly aren't disagreeing over whether Moore knows (by my standards) that he has hands, the disagreement took place long before I got here, and surely even if I was listening outside the door or even sitting beside them it wouldn't make a difference. The charge from relativism is that contextualism loses the phenomenon of disagreement, and is committed to a wide ranging re-description of what people are actually saying, despite what they think they're saying. This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as semantic blindness. We are, as the title of DeRose's paper describes it, 'bamboozled by our own words'.<sup>92</sup>

We can see a version of the basic relativist treatment of the contextual sensitivity of knowledge claims (as we briefly mentioned at 1.2.3.1, above), from Mark Richard.<sup>93</sup> Richard's example here is two women, Didi and Naomi disagreeing over the sentence 'Mary is Rich'. He notes, as we do above, that there are two main problems with contextualist views that fix the content of 'rich' by either Naomi's standard, Didi's standard, or a third person, say a reporter's standard. He calls these 'The Semantic Problem: What disagreement is reported in The Report?', and 'The Substantive Problem: What disagreement are Didi and Naomi having in The Argument?' He considers various contextualist responses concluding that none of them are satisfactory. As we expected, Richard suggests that we can solve these issues by relativising not the content of what is said, but the truth of what is said.

What are we to say, then, about gradeable adjectives such as 'rich'? Well, we could take appearances at face value. In The Report, Didi and Naomi disagree. So there is something which Didi says and Naomi denies. Within the confines of each woman's conversation, each use of 'is rich'

92 Herman Cappelen, "Content Relativism and Semantic Blindness," in *Relative Truth*, ed. G. Carpintero and M. Kölbel (Oxford University Press, 2008), 265–286; Martin Montminy, "Contextualism, Invariantism and Semantic Blindness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87, no. 4 (2009): 639–657; Keith DeRose, "'Bamboozled by Our Own Words': Semantic Blindness and Some Arguments Against Contextualism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73, no. 2 (2011): 316–338.

93 Richard, "Contextualism and Relativism."



is correct. So Didi says something true when she utters 'Mary is rich', Naomi something true when she utters the sentence's denial. This is consistent with the two disagreeing over the truth of a single claim, if the truth of the claim may be relative, so that it may be 'true for Didi, but not for Naomi'. We can make sense of The Report, that is, if we relativise not what is said by sentences such as 'Mary is rich', but the truth of what is said. And if we do this, we solve the substantive problem: the women's substantive disagreement is simply one as to whether Mary is rich.<sup>94</sup>

The downside, as we saw, of having the context sensitivity cause variations in the content, is that we get odd predictions about what sentences really mean, furthermore we lose the phenomenon of disagreement. Every shift in a position heralds new challenges however, and when we put the context sensitivity in to the truth value instead, we different problems. One of the chief problems, is simply how to make sense of the notion that truth itself might vary with context in an interesting way. As Richard admits, 'relative truth strikes many as puzzling', and rightly so. The details of how to make sense of relative truth will be fleshed out in the next chapter, with reference to our chosen relativist, MacFarlane.

### 1.3.5 A Final Terminological Confusion

We already noted that one of the things that Egan called 'relativism' we would rather call 'contextualism', and as Wright has already noted 'the terminology in the literature is already getting horribly tangled, and matters have not been helped by the choice of 'non-indexical contextualism' by John MacFarlane to denote a type of view that is actually a variety of truth-relativism'.<sup>95</sup> I'll also say a little about non-indexical contextualism, but first I'll give some examples of cases where alleged instances of relativism really look more like they should be called varieties of contextualism, and vice-versa.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>95</sup> Wright, "Relativism About Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts About the Very Idea," 163.

Boghossian for example, in *Fear of Knowledge*<sup>96</sup> characterises what he calls ‘truth relativism’ as being committed to the view that the utterance of ‘p’ doesn’t actually express ‘p’, but rather the elliptical ‘relative to X, it is the case that p’. Now from the foregoing discussion we know that this is exactly what the contextualist would say. There is some evidence of a consensus forming on this however, since at least Moruzzi<sup>97</sup> and Rysiew<sup>98</sup> have criticised him for it.

On the other hand, as Rysiew points out,<sup>99</sup> the first person to call himself a contextualist is probably David Annis.<sup>100</sup> However, his thesis is along the following lines: whether or not something counts as a justification depends on the ‘issue-context’, for example, suppose that X knows that polio is caused by a virus. When asked how he knows, he says that his friend, a medical student told him. Under normal circumstances this would be an acceptable justification, but not in an examination for an MD degree. Annis claims that ‘relative to one issue-context a person may be justified in believing h but not justified relative to another context’.<sup>101</sup> This looks a lot more like what people would nowadays call relativism than contextualism. Rysiew also includes Michael Williams as someone who professes contextualism, yet is more readily understood as a relativist by this definition.<sup>102</sup> Finally, Kölbel points out that the most famous version of the view that is called ‘moral relativism’, namely that of Gilbert Harman (op.cit.), ‘is actually a thesis of hidden indexicality’, thus qualifying it as a form of contextualism by our lights.<sup>103</sup>

All of this can hardly be faulted, since debates between contextualism and relativism have only emerged in the last decade, after these writers put forward their views. However one final

96 Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge : Against Relativism and Constructivism*, 52.

97 Sebastiano Moruzzi, “Assertion, Belief and Disagreement: A Problem for Truth-Relativism,” in *Relative Truth*, ed. Manuel García-Carpintero and Max Kölbel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 208.

98 Patrick Rysiew, “Relativism and Contextualism,” in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven D. Hales (John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 289.

99 Ibid.

100 David B Annis, “A Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1978): 213 – 219.

101 Ibid., 215.

102 Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief*, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1999); Rysiew, “Relativism and Contextualism.”

103 Manuel García-Carpintero and Max Kölbel, *Relative Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

'confusion' to note is more nefarious, because it is recent, and it is perpetrated by one of the founders of the debate, and the protagonist in this dissertation, MacFarlane. MacFarlane has described his preferred view as one which he calls 'non-indexical contextualism',<sup>104</sup> however, this type of contextualism is in fact a form of relativism.

In many ways, what MacFarlane is doing in this paper ('Nonindexical Contextualism') is a bit of terminological housework. He wants to claim that the sort of relativism that we have been talking about is a form of context sensitivity, and so it is, for the truth values of the utterances vary from context to context. But context sensitivity can also be used to talk about the most basic sensitivity of the content of a statement to context. However MacFarlane urges that we call this form of sensitivity 'indexicality'. The definition and examples he gives us are

(3) An expression is P-indexical iff its content at a context depends on the P of that context.

(4) An expression is P-context-sensitive iff its extension at a context depends on the P of that context.

Thus, someone who thinks that

(5) It is night in New York City expresses different propositions depending on the time of use holds that it is time-indexical. Someone who thinks that

(6) At the moment when he finished his most famous article, Moore knew that he had hands has different truth values depending on the epistemic standards in play at the context of use holds that it is epistemic-standard-context-sensitive. And so on.<sup>105</sup>

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104 MacFarlane, "Nonindexical Contextualism."

105 Ibid., 232–3.

The point of distinguishing these is to show not only that p-indexicality does not imply p-context sensitivity, since

The sentence “Tomorrow comes after today,” for example, is time-indexical—its content at a context depends on the time of the context—but not time-context-sensitive, since it has the same extension (True) at every context of use.<sup>106</sup>

One example in the paper is what MacFarlane calls ‘non indexical epistemic contextualism’. Standard contextualism (such as the variety we have seen already), he tells us, is indexical, in that it holds that knowledge attributing sentences express different propositions at different contexts of use. So what would a nonindexical contextualism about knowledge attribution look like? Part of it would have to be that ‘know’ expresses the same relation at every context of use, this relation would be the one that a subject S stands in to a proposition P. Hence it is not indexical. But how is it still context sensitive?

Context sensitivity remains because on this view, the truth values of sentences containing ‘know’ depend on the epistemic standard in play at the context of use, not because this standard affects which proposition is expressed, but because it helps determine which circumstance of evaluation to look at in deciding whether these sentences are true or false at the context.<sup>107</sup>

One way that MacFarlane explains the difference is by analogy with the debate between the temporalist and the eternalist. The temporalist thinks that ‘Socrates is sitting’ expresses the same proposition at 2pm and 3pm, but the truth value of that proposition may change with time. The eternalist thinks the opposite, the content of the expression changes, and at each utterance it expresses an eternally true (false) proposition along the lines of ‘Socrates is sitting at 2pm, January 1st 412 BC’. Both think that these sentences are time-context sensitive. However the eternalist

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106 *Ibid.*, 233.

107 *Ibid.*, 237.

thinks that the tensed sentence is time-indexical, whereas the temporalist does not. The temporalist is a non-indexical contextualist.<sup>108</sup> This distinction that MacFarlane draws on places us back in our earlier discussion of Recanati's *Lekton* and Austinian Proposition (1.3.4, above).

As we alluded to earlier, MacFarlane employs a second context, in order to assess the truth or falsity of an utterance. His 'context of assessment' functions semantically along the same lines as Kaplan's 'circumstance of evaluation', however there are differences, which we will explore in the next chapter. The main issue is that the contextualism does not stem from the content-fixing context of use, hence it is not indexical contextualism. The question as to what exactly a context is, and how it functions is one that will be explored in detail in Chapter Two.

Although at first, the idea of 'non indexical contextualism' as used to describe a form of relativism seemed to through a spanner in the works, it actually carves up what is at stake between what we have been calling contextualism on the one hand and relativism on the other, so that we have a fairly good working model of their differences.

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108 *Ibid.*, 234.

## 2 MacFarlane's Relativism

### 2.1 Introduction

#### 2.1.1 The Semantic Application of Relativism

Cappelen and Hawthorne have recently noted the roots of some of the modern relativistic ideas in the possible worlds semantics of Lewis and others. They attribute to ‘Carnap, Montague, Lewis, Kaplan and others’ the idea of semantic content where we ‘represent a content by a function from a circumstance of evaluation to an appropriate extension. Carnap called such functions *intensions*’.<sup>109</sup> We will look at the Kaplanian idea of content in some more detail later, but the basic idea from Kaplan, Lewis, *et al.* is that we should relativise the truth and falsity of content not only to worlds, but also to times, locations, and standards of precision. It is these parameters which go to make up a particular context, which we discuss later. Although these ideas are not radically relativist, since Kaplan and Lewis would argue that they are just demonstrating how we might fix the content of a sentence taking into account its particular context, Cappelen and Hawthorne complain that the Lewis/Kaplan model has already given up the idea that truth and falsity are monadic properties which propositions simply instantiate (they call this ‘simplicity’), because it becomes natural to think on the one hand of truth always as relative to a possible world, that is, ‘simple truth and falsity have given way to alethic relations to worlds’.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, with Kaplan’s contexts it becomes natural to think of statements as only true relative to a number of parameters, for instance: world, time, and location.

It is crucial that MacFarlane’s proposal has its roots in these ideas of Kaplan and Lewis, and perhaps it is the case that the plausibility of his proposal relies on accepting this way of looking at

<sup>109</sup> Cappelen and Hawthorne, *Relativism and Monadic Truth*, 7.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

things, although we do not need to discuss that here.<sup>111</sup>

### 2.1.2 MacFarlane's Version of Relativism

As we shall see in more detail, MacFarlane's plan is to take the broadly Kaplanian idea that truth is relativised to various parameters, and add more. The following passage from 'Relativism and Disagreement' is a good example of this move

Taking this line of thought a little farther, the relativist might envision contents that are "sense-of-humor neutral" or "standard-of-taste neutral" or "epistemic-state neutral," and circumstances of evaluation that include parameters for a sense of humor, a standard of taste, or an epistemic state. This move would open up room for the truth value of a proposition to vary with these "subjective" factors in much the same way that it varies with the world of evaluation. The very same proposition—say, that apples are delicious—could be true with respect to one standard of taste, false with respect to another.<sup>112</sup>

Here we see an explicit comparison being drawn between elements of assessor sensitivity and the world parameter of possible worlds semantics. It is important to note the motivation for doing this, which is highly pragmatic, that is, it is justified by the desirable results it can give us. As we have seen there is no global relativism of the classical sort being proposed here, the sort that might be self refuting in any of Mackie's senses.<sup>113</sup> At the same time this is not a local relativism, it does not say something like 'ethical and aesthetic statements are of a different kind to other statements, and their truth is relative to some assessor based parameter'. Rather it gives us a

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111 Cappelen and Hawthorne think that it does reply on the plausibility of the Kaplan/Lewis proposal. They write: 'Contemporary Analytic relativists reason as follows: "Lewis and Kaplan have shown that we need to relativise truth to triples of <world, time, location>. Hence, in a way, anyone who follows Lewis and Kaplan is already a relativist. There are only truth and falsity relative to these three parameters, and so there is no such thing as truth *simpliciter*. But, having already started down this road, why not exploit these strategies further? In particular, by adding new and exotic parameters into the circumstances of evaluation, we can allow the contents of thought and talk to be non-specific (in Kaplan's sense) along dimensions other than world, time, and location"' Ibid., 10.

112 MacFarlane, "Relativism and Disagreement," 21–2.

113 J. L. Mackie, "Self-Refutation--A Formal Analysis," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 14, no. 56 (1964): 193–203.

template, which can be applied wherever is useful.

For example, MacFarlane claims that the changes he proposes do not commit us to saying that there are any ‘a-contextual’ sentences. His system only has benefits, since if there are any such sentences, it can deal with them. However merely making room for a-contextual sentences does not commit us to their existence. As he writes, ‘if one’s definition of “s is true at context of utterance u and context of assessment a” makes no reference to a, no sentence in the language will be a-contextual. Thus an advocate of the absoluteness of utterance-truth has nothing to fear from the freedom it gives us’.<sup>114</sup> Thus MacFarlane’s relativism ‘amounts to recognising a new kind of linguistic context-sensitivity’.<sup>115</sup>

MacFarlane’s system is supposed to operate at the level of semantics, and this is an advantage because it offers him the potential generality of global relativism without the obvious pitfalls. Let us take as an example of what he wants to do his solution to the problem of future contingents, because it is the first appearance of MacFarlane’s proposal, and of all the problems tackled it has the broadest philosophical pedigree. One further point about the future contingents solution sets it apart from the others: MacFarlane truth-relativism is recommended to us generally for pragmatic reasons, i.e. we can get a lot of mileage from such a solution, and the other areas that it is applied to are outlined below. However the relativist solution to the problem of future contingents is in a stronger position, since it is the only one that can save all the intuitions that MacFarlane argues we ought to save.

### 2.1.3 An Example: Future Contingents

The problem is the one Aristotle famously raised in *De Interpretatione*, namely, do assertions concerning contingent events in the future have a truth value now? Aristotle worried that

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<sup>114</sup> MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” 331.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.



he could not reconcile the notion that every assertion is either true or false, with the notion that the future is genuinely contingent.<sup>116</sup>

Like Aristotle, MacFarlane is torn between two intuitions, furthermore, he thinks we are right to be so torn. The two intuitions are that first, the future is genuinely (not just in an epistemic sense) open, and second, that if tomorrow it is true to say that there is a sea battle now, then today it should be true to say that there will be a sea battle tomorrow.

The motivation for the indeterminacy intuition – that there is a genuinely open future – appears to be that, abandoning this intuition puts the coherence of our everyday talk about the future in jeopardy. A common misconception here might be that MacFarlane, like Aristotle, is worried about the spectre of fatalism, or metaphysical causal determinism.<sup>117</sup> In that case, we would simply fall back on the many criticisms and solutions of Aristotle’s particular problem.<sup>118</sup> I do not think that this is the case. MacFarlane’s problem remains in the field of semantics. He writes

Whether the world is objectively indeterministic in this sense is, of course, a substantive scientific (and perhaps metaphysical) question. I do not here presuppose an affirmative answer to this question. All I am presupposing is that talk about the future would not be incoherent in an objectively indeterministic world. Determinism may be true, but it is not for the semanticist to say so.<sup>119</sup>

The motivation for indeterminacy is made with reference to a simple figure, representing branching histories, reproduced below.<sup>120</sup>

116 The Discussion of the sea battle is at *On Interpretation* IX. Aristotle (1949). *Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics*. Cambridge MA, London England, Harvard University Press.

117 For Aristotle’s worry that everything that will be, happens by necessity, see *On Interpretation* book IX, 18b  
118 Jaakko Hintikka, *Time & Necessity: Studies in Aristotle’s Theory of Modality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973);  
Crispin Wright, *Realism, Meaning and Truth* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1993), 177.

119 MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” 323.

120 Figure reproduced from p. 323 of MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth.”

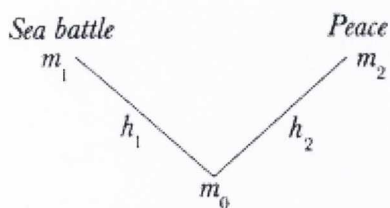


Figure 1: Branching histories

This is a picture of the future, given objective indeterminacy. Our intuition should be that the utterance at moment  $m_0$  referring to an event at  $m_1$  should be neither true nor false, since  $m_0$  is on two objectively possible future histories,  $h_1$  and  $h_2$ . On  $h_1$  the utterance is true. On  $h_2$  it is false. Thus the utterance at  $m_0$  is neither true nor false.

The motivation for the opposite intuition is a very simple argument, made at  $m_1$ . MacFarlane says that this reasoning seems ‘unimpeachable’. We are to suppose that an observer, watching the sea battle at  $m_1$  says:

Jake asserted yesterday that there would be a sea battle today

There is a sea battle today

So Jake's assertion was true.<sup>121</sup>

But then our two intuitions tell us both that the utterance at  $m_0$  is neither true nor false (how exactly MacFarlane details his account of indeterminacy is discussed below), *and* that it is true.

Thus an adequate account of truth concerning future contingents is required to preserve our intuitions. MacFarlane claims that traditional accounts have been unable to do so. However, his account, which relativises utterance truth to a context of assessment can preserve both intuitions. Therefore, in ‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’ he claims that although we can apply the relativist account to various areas, it is only strictly required by future contingents. The benefit of future contingents is that it forces truth-relativism on us, which can then ‘liberate’ us from various

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 325.

conceptual bonds elsewhere:

Once we have accepted a-contextuality in sentences about the future, it is natural to look for it elsewhere. I have found fruitful applications to Lewis' theory of accommodation, epistemic contextualism, evaluative relativism, and the interpretation of our scientific predecessors' theoretical discourse. I do not think that any of these other applications demand a-contextuality, as future contingents do. In each case, there are acceptable (even if not optimal) solutions that do not require rejecting the absoluteness of utterance-truth. But once we have abandoned absoluteness and accepted a-contextuality in one case, there is no principled reason not to explore its applications to these other cases as well. Future contingents are important because they force us to abandon absoluteness, liberating us from its conceptual bonds elsewhere.<sup>122</sup>

As we shall see, MacFarlane goes on to apply a similar model to various areas, in later papers. But as the above quotation suggests, the pay-off of solving all of these philosophical problems is not without a price, albeit 'a small price to pay for an adequate account of future contingents'.<sup>123</sup> What we are forced to abandon in order to give this account is what MacFarlane calls 'the absoluteness assumption', that is, 'the orthodox assumption that truth for utterances is non-relative'.<sup>124</sup> Abandoning the absoluteness constraint opens up the possibility that utterance truth might be relative. On the absolutist model, once we fix various matters of context etc., we can reach the content of an utterance, whose truth value ought to be separate from contexts and circumstances. MacFarlane's solution will work on the basis of introducing a new type of contextuality. He writes that 'plainly we are going to need sentence-truth to be doubly relativised, to a context of utterance and a context of assessment'.<sup>125</sup> We discuss the function of context of utterance below, and the novel introduction, the context of assessment. But at first glance we can see that MacFarlane's relativism has the shape of introducing a new parameter to which the truth or falsity of an utterance (later a

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122 *Ibid.*, 336.

123 *Ibid.*, 332.

124 *Ibid.*, 322.

125 *Ibid.*, 330.

proposition) is relative, and that is the particular context from which it is assessed, as well as the traditional context from which it is uttered.

### **2.1.4 Why Focus on MacFarlane?**

As noted at 1.1.2, we have chosen to take MacFarlane as our focus rather than any of the similar contemporary relativists that we mentioned there, since MacFarlane's aim is to motivate a single system that can be applied to a number of areas. It is general enough so as not to be beholden to any particular motivation, MacFarlane is quite pragmatic about this, telling us that we are not forced to say that in every domain there is double contextuality, but rather, his system allows us to make room for it wherever necessary. It does not require you to find the problem of faultless disagreement a pressing one, for example. All that it requires is that for at least one problem, it provides the best solution. As we noted at 1.1.2, this is a payoff of focussing specifically on the subsentential semantics. We have already listed the main writings that will be our focus, at footnote 14. We will see below that one or two changes occur to MacFarlane's system (which is otherwise quite stable across the various papers in which it is expounded), for instance, MacFarlane seems to skirt around talking of propositions in 2003, but on foot of various criticisms he rectifies this in 2008. A second prominent change is that in 2003 the somewhat obscure notion of postsemantics appears to play a prominent role. This is discussed in detail below, but I will ultimately show that its prominence is illusory, since it drops out of the picture in subsequent papers, yet the system remains the same. I will argue that it is a difficult and confusing addition to an already complicated system, and since the system seems to operate normally at later stages without it, we may pass over it safely.

### 2.1.5 The Purpose of This Exposition

My aim in writing this chapter is to explain what MacFarlane's proposal to relativise truth is, and how it is put forward across several papers. Secondly, I want to highlight how MacFarlane avoids the most pressing criticism that is made of him, or at least, how he answers a criticism that was made of the very idea of truth relativised to parameters, in the paper 'Does tense logic rest on a mistake?' by Gareth Evans.<sup>126</sup>

Explaining the machinery of MacFarlane's proposal, as well as his attempt to avoid Evans' criticism will provide the foundation for later critical features of my dissertation. As we will see, the escape route that MacFarlane chooses is to give us a picture of assertion and language use that relies on Robert Brandom's inferentialism. The critical aspect of my dissertation in later chapters will be to highlight a tension between the sort of quasi-pragmatist ideas about assertion and language that MacFarlane is forced to endorse in order to avoid Evans, and the original project of relativising truth.

I take as my cue the recent suggestion from García-Carpintero that MacFarlane's resort to Brandom's 'more convoluted conception of the norms of assertion' places an 'extra burden on radical relativism'.<sup>127</sup> I want to explore in more detail what that extra burden might consist of.

On the one hand, siding with Brandom risks relegating truth to an expressive role, and making the norms of assertion far more based on justification. Brandom may do this, but a tension arises if a truth-relativist does it, since claiming to relativise truth but in fact substituting justification for it does not seem to be the achievement that giving a coherent account of relative truth ought to be. In other words, someone who does not think truth has an important role to play does not tend to impress by claiming to have relativised truth. The tension that we will see develop in the third and fourth chapters will be between keeping an account of truth that is robust enough to

<sup>126</sup> Evans, *Collected Papers*, 343–63.

<sup>127</sup> García-Carpintero, "Relativism, Vagueness and What Is Said," 148.

admit of relativisation (we will argue that Brandom's account is in no such way robust), and at the same time employing an account of assertoric norms that are heavily social in nature, norms that naturally go hand in hand with jettisoning the robust account of truth that the relativist needs. This tension caused by MacFarlane's proximity to Brandom will constitute the critical aspect of my thesis.

### 2.1.6 The Layout of This Chapter

MacFarlane's relativism consists in an additional type of contextuality, the truth of an assertion ought to be relative to both a context of use (which is traditional) but also now a context of assessment. Thus my first task is to explain what is meant by context. I show how contexts can feed relativism, and in particular MacFarlane's system. Having explained the function of contexts with reference to MacFarlane's solution of the problem of future contingents, I go on to explain several other areas that the system is applied to, namely knowledge attribution, faultless disagreement, and epistemic modals. I then map two changes that the system has undergone, that is the move from talk of assertion and utterance to content and proposition, and secondly the disappearance of the tricky neologism post-semantics from the picture after MacFarlane (2003). Next I consider a criticism that MacFarlane is eager to avoid, that is the criticism of tense logic made by Evans in 'Does Tense Logic Rest on A Mistake?'<sup>128</sup> which was not directed at MacFarlane but which MacFarlane is keen to avoid for good reasons. Finally I show how he avoids such a line of criticism by opting for a particular view of assertion which has its roots in Brandom's inferentialism.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Evans, *Collected Papers*, 343–63.

<sup>129</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*; Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: an Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2000).

## 2.2 Contexts

### 2.2.1 What is a Context?

The *Locus Classicus* for the issue of context in philosophy is David Lewis's 'Index, Context, and Content',<sup>130</sup> which claims that a grammar, if it is to do its job as a systematic restatement of our common knowledge about our linguistic communicative practices, must be able to assign semantic values that determine which sentences are true in which contexts.<sup>131</sup> But what is a context? Lewis says that when we say truth depends on context, there are two issues, context dependence and index dependence.

A context is a location – time, place, and possible world – where a sentence is said. It has countless features, determined by the character of the location. An index is an n-tuple of features of context, but not necessarily features that go together in any possible context<sup>132</sup>

Both of these features of contextual dependence are necessary according to Lewis. Since we are unlikely to think of all the features of context on which truth depends, we probably won't construct rich enough indices, so we need context-dependence as well as index-dependence. Vice-versa, since indices can be shifted one feature at a time, but not contexts, we need index-dependence as well as context-dependence.

What we get can be referred to as a 'two dimensional' system, as proposed by Lewis, Kaplan,<sup>133</sup> and Stalnaker among others.<sup>134</sup> There are many possible variations, but we can take it that

130 Lewis, "Index, Context, and Content."

131 Ibid., 21.

132 Ibid.

133 Kaplan et al., *Themes from Kaplan*; Lewis, "Index, Context, and Content."

134 Stalnaker summarises his similar position: "The scheme I am proposing looks roughly like this: The syntactical and semantical rules for a language determine an interpreted sentence or clause; this, together with some features of the

generally one could call contents the relevant functions from indices to truth-values. We would then say that that sentences together with contexts determine contents, which, in turn, together with indices, determine truth values.

MacFarlane mentions both Lewis and Kaplan frequently, and appears to take Kaplan's basic model to be standard. Lewis characterises Kaplan's system as follows. 'Content', what Kaplan calls 'proposition' is composed of a sentence and the context in which it is said. That proposition, together with the 'circumstance', which Lewis reads as Kaplan's 'index', yields the truth value.

In 'Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths', MacFarlane describes such a basic system 'in the style of Lewis (1980) [our *Lewis 1998*] and Kaplan (1989)', which he claims is 'as vanilla as possible'. Such a system requires truth to be relative to an assignment (to handle quantifiers), an index (to handle operators), and a context (to handle indexicals).<sup>135</sup>

An assignment is a function from variables to objects in the domain. An index is a collection of separately shiftable parameters (*a la* Lewis). A context must be capable of supplying semantic values for indexicals and other context-sensitive expressions, however MacFarlane claims that it need not be thought of as a sequence of parameters, as in Kaplan's work.<sup>136</sup>

### 2.2.2 Contexts and Relativism

Wright has recently said that the proto-relativist thesis is that truth (or whatever it is we are trying to relativise) should involve a new perhaps unexpected parameter.<sup>137</sup> This could be standard of taste, or perhaps perspective. In MacFarlane's case we might expect that the introduction of 'context' as that extra parameter is enough to generate relativism. MacFarlane

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context of use of the sentence or clause determines a proposition; this in turn, together with a possible world, determines a truth-value. An interpreted sentence, then, corresponds to a function from contexts into propositions, and a proposition is a function from possible worlds into truth-values'. Robert Stalnaker, *Context and Content : Essays on Intentionality in Speech and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

135 MacFarlane, "Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths," 83.

136 Kaplan et al., *Themes from Kaplan*.

137 Wright, "Relativism About Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts About the Very Idea."



rejects this however. Context is already in play in determining sentence meaning, and this does not lead to any relativism, even though, since the truth value of an utterance is dependent upon its context of use, its truth is therefore already relative to a context of use.

One might think that being a relativist is just a matter of relativizing truth to some parameter. But it is not that simple. Many relativizations of truth are entirely orthodox. In model theory we talk of sentences being true relative to a model and an assignment of values to the variables, and in formal semantics we talk of sentences being true relative to a speaker and time, or more generally (following Kaplan 1989) a context of use. To my knowledge, no one has ever accused Tarski and Kaplan of being relativists for making use of these relativised forms of truth!<sup>138</sup>

However we might want to respond that what someone like Wright really was getting at is that once we have fixed the content of an utterance via the context of use, then relativism can come in as a thesis about the truth of that proposition, or content, being relative to some extra parameter. This is more or less what Kölbel says (as we discussed in more depth at 1.2.4), describing a relativism as ‘not-tame’ if it has the form: ‘For any  $x$  that is a proposition of a certain kind  $K$ , it is relative to  $P$  whether  $x$  is true’.<sup>139</sup>

But MacFarlane makes the point here, as elsewhere, that we already make propositions relative to a possible world or circumstance of evaluation, and possible to a standard of precision too.

This is interesting. MacFarlane’s strategy is to say at the outset that we already countenance two types of relativism about truth, without calling it relativism or seeing it as outlandish. First, utterance meaning/content, and hence truth, is relative to context of use. Second, propositional truth is relative to a circumstance of evaluation, a possible world.

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138 MacFarlane, “Making Sense of Relative Truth,” 306.

139 Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*, 119.

How about if we said, a real relativist makes propositional truth relative to some extra parameter, extra to possible worlds and times? This further refinement would miss the point, says MacFarlane. For instance, ‘Helen was beautiful at the beginning of the Trojan War’ has truth values relative to a world and an aesthetic standard. But this would not make us relativists, we could still be aesthetic absolutists. Thus MacFarlane’s point against Kölbel’s definition is that ‘It’s not the kind of parameter that matters, but how it’s treated’.<sup>140</sup>

### 2.2.3 Context Sensitivity

MacFarlane employs a certain terminology throughout his various papers whereby a sentence can be ‘sensitive’ in two different ways. It can be use-sensitive if its truth varies with the context of use ( $C_u$ ). Similarly it can be assessment-sensitive if its truth varies with the context of assessment ( $C_a$ ).

MacFarlane sees it as important to separate context sensitivity from indexicality. Use-indexical sentences express different propositions at different contexts of use, and assessment-indexical sentences express different propositions at different contexts of assessment. The following sentence, says MacFarlane, is use-sensitive, but not use indexical.

The number of AIDS-infected babies born in Oakland in 2004 is 65.

The sentence ‘Helen was beautiful at the beginning of the Trojan War’ on the other hand, is assessment sensitive, but not assessment indexical, if we accept a form of relativism such that the truth of a proposition depends on the aesthetic standards of an assessor. Given this terminology,

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<sup>140</sup> MacFarlane, “Making Sense of Relative Truth,” 308.

MacFarlane defines relativism about truth as the following

There is at least one assessment-sensitive sentence.

This has two further subdivisions:

Expressive Relativism: there is at least one assessment indexical sentence, that is, a sentence that expresses different propositions at different contexts of assessment.

Propositional Relativism: there is at least one assessment-sensitive proposition, that is, a proposition whose truth value varies with the context of assessment.<sup>141</sup>

### 2.2.4 Doubly Contextual Relativism

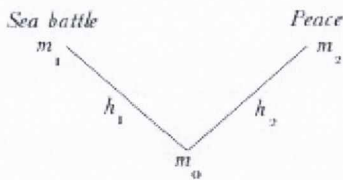


Figure 1: Branching histories

If we take as our example, the problem of future contingents, we can see that with only one context, the context of utterance taken into account, when the context of utterance is  $m_0$ , the sentence ‘there will be a sea battle tomorrow’ is true on history 1 and false on history 2. If the context of utterance is  $m_1$  however, it is true. This contradiction is what MacFarlane aims to solve. But supposing we introduce the second context, that is,  $C_a$  as well as  $C_o$ , then instead of saying

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141 Ibid., 312.

‘sentence S is true at  $C_u$ ’, which generates our difficulty, we say instead, ‘sentence S is true at  $C_u$ ,  $C_a$ ’.

This means that the model of double contextuality yields the following result in the case of the sea battle, which is exactly what MacFarlane is looking for:

At  $u = m_0$  and  $a = m_0$ ,  $s$  is neither true nor false (because we must look at both points,  $m_0/h_1$  and  $m_0/h_2$ )

At  $u = m_0$  and  $a = m_1$ ,  $s$  is true (because we look only at  $m_0/h_1$ )

At  $u = m_0$  and  $a = m_2$ ,  $s$  is false (because we look only at  $m_0/h_2$ ).<sup>142</sup>

## 2.3 Other Applications of MacFarlane’s Bicontextual Relativism

### 2.3.1 Application to Knowledge Attribution

In ‘The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions’<sup>143</sup> MacFarlane addresses a problem which he sets up in a way that is structurally similar to the problem of future contingents. The problem is this: how can we understand the fact that attribution of knowledge seems correct in certain contexts and incorrect in others? In ‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’ we saw that MacFarlane wished to mediate between a ‘hard’ position (determinacy), and a softer one (indeterminacy). Just as in that paper, the pull is almost between the more ‘intuitive’ position, and the one which is more philosophically defensible, in this case, invariantism and contextualism.

Where knowledge attribution is concerned, MacFarlane thinks he can reconcile invariantism, which is the view ‘that “know” is not sensitive to the epistemic standards in play at the context of use’ with contextualism, the view that the extension of ‘know’ is ‘sensitive to

<sup>142</sup> MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” 332.

<sup>143</sup> MacFarlane, “The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions.”

contextually determined epistemic standards'.<sup>144</sup>

Again, this is achieved by distinguishing two forms of contextualism. As MacFarlane sets it up, the real disagreement between the contextualist and the invariantist is whether the context of use determines the extension of 'know'. MacFarlane sides with the invariantist here, 'know' is not sensitive to how and when it is used. But it is sensitive to how and when it is assessed.

Thus, I can agree with the invariantist that "know" is not sensitive to the epistemic standards in play at the context of use, while still acknowledging a kind of contextual sensitivity to epistemic standards. The proposed semantics for "know" is contextualist along one dimension (contexts of assessment) and invariantist along another (contexts of use).<sup>145</sup>

MacFarlane's 'standard taxonomy of positions on the semantics of "know"' begins with the question 'Is "know" standards-sensitive?' A negative answer yields 'Strict Invariantism', that is, the semantics of 'know' is invariant across use and circumstance. The positive answer branches between two types of standard, those who believe 'know' is sensitive to standards of use are Contextualists, who believe that 'know' is use-variable but circumstance-invariant. Those who believe that 'know' is sensitive to standards at the circumstance of evaluation are Sensitive Invariantists; 'know' is use-invariant but circumstance-variable.<sup>146</sup>

I know that my car is in the driveway (as we discussed at 1.3.4.2). But if someone pushes me on this, I will concede that I don't really know. After all, anything could have happened in my (even brief) absence. But after I have conceded that I don't really know, it doesn't seem that I have learned anything, or that I have corrected a mistake, since I will not learn from such a mistake. I will say the same thing tomorrow. Perhaps we can say instead that this was loose talk: I did not literally mean that *I knew*. But MacFarlane rejects this:

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 197–8.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 199.

I would have said the same thing in a forum where non-literal speech is discouraged, like a courtroom. And I would have said the same thing if I had been instructed to say just what I meant, without exaggeration, artifice, or innuendo. Indeed, I would have said the same thing in a crowd of epistemologists, so it was not just a matter of 'speaking with the vulgar'.<sup>147</sup>

These considerations leave us in difficulty. Perhaps the mistake is to concede that I don't really know. And yet the person who says 'it may have been stolen' is surely not saying something that can be ignored, or that is irrelevant. However it seems contradictory to say 'although I know, there is always the chance that...'

The explanation, as MacFarlane sees it, is that standards seem to have shifted at some point: If I was speaking literally both times, and if I didn't make a mistake, then presumably the standards I must meet in order to count as 'knowing' must have changed. I met the laxer standards that were in play at the time of my first knowledge claim, but not the stricter ones that came into play after the mention of car thieves.<sup>148</sup>

However, making sense of how this happens is the problem. MacFarlane's suggestion after exploring how the standard accounts fit the facts is that the epistemic standards relevant to determining the extension of 'know' are not those in play at the context of use or those in play at the circumstance of evaluation, but those in play at the context of assessment.<sup>149</sup> MacFarlane expands his original taxonomy to make room for a third type of standards sensitivity, that is, at the context of assessment. His relativism about knowledge attributions is thus use-invariant, circumstance-invariant, but assessment-variable. He writes:

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147 *Ibid.*, 201.

148 *Ibid.*

149 *Ibid.*, 218.

My proposal is that 'know' is sensitive to the epistemic standards in play at the context of assessment. It is a kind of contextualism, then, but not at all the usual kind. To avoid confusion, I will call it 'relativism', reserving the term 'contextualism' for the view that 'know' is sensitive to the epistemic standards in play at the context of use. Call a semantics for 'know' assessment-variable just in case it allows the epistemic standard relevant for determining the extension of 'know' to vary with the context of assessment, and assessment-invariant otherwise.<sup>150</sup>

The rest of MacFarlane's paper addresses the issue of proposition versus expression, which will be dealt with in section 2.4.1. MacFarlane also fleshes out his adherence to a Brandomian deontic scorekeeping model of commitment and assertion, justification, withdrawal and so on, which is dealt with more generally in Chapters Three and Four.

### **2.3.2 Application to 'Faultless Disagreement'**

The phenomenon of 'faultless disagreement' is another way of stating the natural viewpoint that issues of taste, beauty, humour or the like, are 'subjective'. This basic intuition is supported by the degree to which we disagree on these issues. If there were objective facts governing these areas, then we could be taste-blind humour-blind etc. Although we often accuse people we disagree with of having no sense of humour or no taste, the difference is they will rarely readily agree, or defer to our superior abilities, the way, say, a colour-blind person would if we were having a disagreement over whether something was red or green.

Faultless disagreement can occur in the areas where we do not want to say that disagreement implies fault. If two people differ over what colour something is, one or both must be at fault. We do not generally want to say this about two people disagreeing about whether a particular wine is

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

tasty or not.

One obvious story about this subject is contextualism. As MacFarlane puts it:

The contextualist takes the subjectivity of a discourse to consist in the fact that it is covertly about the speaker (or perhaps a larger group picked out by the speaker's context and intentions). Thus, in saying that apples are "delicious," the speaker says, in effect, that apples taste good to her (or to those in her group). In saying that a joke is "funny," she says that it appropriately engages her sense of humor (or that of her group). And in saying that some state of affairs is "likely," she says that it is likely given what she knows, or perhaps what she and her co-investigators know.<sup>151</sup>

In this paper, MacFarlane urges his relativism that relies on double context dependence, rather than such a contextualism. The main problem with contextualists for MacFarlane is that they lose the phenomenon of disagreement.

If in saying 'apples are delicious' I am saying that they taste good to me, while in saying 'apples are not delicious' you are denying that they taste good to you, then we are no more disagreeing with each other than we would be if I were to say 'My name is John' and you were to say 'My name is not John'.<sup>152</sup>

Does the contextualist have any comeback? MacFarlane considers Keith DeRose's application of Lewis' scoreboard metaphor to make sense of contextualism.<sup>153</sup> Instead of claims being partly and covertly about the speaker, we take the claims to be partly and covertly about some shared conversational score so to speak. The scoreboard might include a shared epistemic standard, which changes as the conversation progresses. In Lewis' example, for instance, previous sentences indicating that we are speaking in a loose or strict sense might affect whether we should count

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<sup>151</sup> MacFarlane, "Relativism and Disagreement," 18.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Keith DeRose, "Single Scoreboard Semantics," *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004): 1–21.



‘France is hexagonal’ as true or not.<sup>154</sup> Knowing what standard is in play is part of being attentive to the scoreboard.

Lewis outlines two competing intuitions that the scoreboard wishes to capture, both the seeming subjectivity of the view, and the seeming disagreement that can occur. The scoreboard works because it shares the subjective element, that is, both subjects are looking to the same scoreboard.

MacFarlane’s problem with it is that it ‘doesn’t give us enough disagreement’.<sup>155</sup> Disagreement does not always take place within a ‘conversation’ which can have a shared scoreboard. To take just one of his examples:

when I overhear a group of ten-year-olds chattering about how “funny” certain knock-knock jokes are, I may think that they are wrong. These jokes just aren’t that funny. But the kids certainly don’t think of themselves as involved in a conversation with me—they may not even know I’m there. Nor do I think of myself as conversing with them.<sup>156</sup>

But what is disagreement, after all? MacFarlane thinks that a simple model whereby if I reject something you accept, we disagree, will not work. Suppose we have a tensed proposition- ‘Joe is sitting’. If you asserted it at 2, and I denied it at 3, we might not be disagreeing. MacFarlane claims that the point can be made just as well with eternal propositions, since they are themselves relative to worlds. Thus Jane can reject what her counterpart in another world accepts, and they may not disagree.

We may be tempted to say here that we are not persuaded by realism about possible worlds. MacFarlane pre-empts this:

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154 Lewis, “Index, Context, and Content,” 24.

155 MacFarlane, “Relativism and Disagreement,” 20.

156 Ibid.

Nothing hinges here on the realist talk of worlds and counterparts. However you think of modality, it makes sense to ask whether in saying what one would have said, in some counterfactual situation, one would have disagreed with what one actually did say. That you would have rejected the proposition you actually accepted is not sufficient for an affirmative answer to this question.<sup>157</sup>

This gives rise to an important strategic move for MacFarlane. He contends that we must consider the contexts in which a speech act or proposition occurs, if we are to give any meaning to disagreement. The idea of ‘accuracy’ is introduced, partly because MacFarlane realises (as he does in ‘Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths’) that we should not apply ‘true’ and ‘false’ to acts. So if we want to talk about acts, such as disagreement, accepting or rejecting, we need some new terminology. Thus:

Accuracy. An acceptance (rejection) is accurate just in case the proposition accepted is true (false) at the circumstance of evaluation that is relevant to the assessment of the acceptance (rejection) in its context (or at all such circumstances, if there is more than one)<sup>158</sup>

After some discussion, MacFarlane settles on the idea that disagreement occurs when there is a proposition that one party accepts, and the other rejects, and the acceptance and the rejection cannot both be accurate. Although this account still has minor and obscure flaws, MacFarlane says that he cannot do any better.

However, the consideration of contexts has now been introduced as necessary to understanding disagreement. Given MacFarlane’s other solutions to problems, it is not hard to see where this is going. First, MacFarlane presents the problems of use-centric accuracy as a description

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

of disagreement :

USE-CENTRIC ACCURACY. An acceptance (rejection) of a proposition  $p$  at a context  $C$  is accurate iff  $p$  is true (false) at the circumstance  $\langle w_C, s_C \rangle$ , where  $w_C$  is the world of  $C$  and  $s_C$  is the standard of taste of the speaker at  $C$ .<sup>159</sup>

Two people can accept and reject a proposition and yet not disagree here provided they have different standards of taste. MacFarlane calls this ‘faux-disagreement’,<sup>160</sup> and claims that it is not really relativism, since it is formally no different from Kaplan’s system in Demonstratives.

‘Real relativism’ of the kind urged by MacFarlane requires the introduction of a second context. Thus when talking about disagreement and accuracy, we should discuss ‘perspectival accuracy’:

PERSPECTIVAL ACCURACY. An acceptance (rejection) of a proposition  $p$  at a context  $C_U$  is accurate (as assessed from a context  $C_A$ ) iff  $p$  is true (false) at the circumstance  $\langle w_{C_U}, s_{C_A} \rangle$ , where  $w_{C_U}$  = the world of  $C_U$  and  $s_{C_A}$  = the standard of taste of the assessor at  $C_A$ .<sup>161</sup>

MacFarlane claims that relativism consists not in simply relativising propositional truth to non-standard parameters like standards of taste, rather real relativism consists in adopting a certain view about how the accuracy of certain acts or states is to be assessed.

The final section expands upon the notion of aiming at accuracy, and enlists various Brandomian principles concerning challenge and justification, in a similar vein to what we have seen in MacFarlane’s various other papers.

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159 Ibid., 25.

160 Ibid., 26.

161 Ibid.

### 2.3.3 Epistemic Modals

MacFarlane applies this same model to epistemic use of modal words (necessarily, possibly, probably, may, must, might, could etc.) in ‘Epistemic Modals are Assessment Sensitive’ (2011).<sup>162</sup> The issue with epistemic modals arises when we try to define what their truth rests on. Clearly it will have something to do with knowledge (that is the epistemic part), but the question is, whose knowledge? If our answer is ‘the speaker’, MacFarlane calls this ‘solipsistic contextualism’. The same intuitions that motivate solipsistic contextualism explain why sentences such 1 and 2 below sound paradoxical.

(1) Joe might be in Boston, but I know he isn’t.

(2) Joe might be in Boston, but he isn’t.

1 is a contradiction, since when the second conjunct expresses a truth, the first must express a falsehood. 2 is not so straightforward, however pragmatically it is problematic, since one represents oneself as knowing that he isn’t there, which is in conflict with the first part.<sup>163</sup>

Problems with contextualism have long been noticed however, this has prompted expressivists et al. to abandon truth conditional semantics for epistemic modals. According to MacFarlane though, this is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Contextualism may rely on truth conditional semantics, but the failure of contextualism does not imply the failure of truth conditional semantics.

At this point, MacFarlane once again proposes to solve what is seemingly an impasse by the introduction of context of assessment.

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<sup>162</sup> MacFarlane, “Epistemic Modals Are Assessment-Sensitive.”

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 144–5.

there is, as I will argue, a viable truth-conditional semantics for epistemic modals, provided one is willing to entertain the idea that truth varies not just with the context in which a claim is made, but with the context in which it is assessed.<sup>164</sup>

All three problems that MacFarlane considers against solipsistic contextualism are facets of the same problem: that is, it cannot explain why we take ourselves to be disagreeing with one another, even when we have different bodies of background knowledge.

1. Firstly it can't make sense of third person assessments. We don't take a speaker's epistemic modal claims to be equivalent claims about what is ruled out by what the speaker knows at the time of utterance. MacFarlane draws out this difference by imagining two conversations, one, where Sally says 'I don't know anything that would rule out Joe's being in Boston right now', or more simply 'for all I know Joe is in Boston'. In the second case Sally says 'Joe might be in Boston right now'. Supposing you overhear this, but you know Joe isn't in Boston. Then it seems normal to say that Sally spoke falsely on the second occasion but not the first. Solipsistic contextualism cannot make sense of this.
2. The second problem focuses on retraction. MacFarlane imagines a similar case to the one above, where there is an embedded or qualified assertion, such as 'for all I know', but this time it is 'it's rumoured that'. We are to consider how odd retraction would be in the following case:

"It's rumored that you are leaving California."

"That's completely false!"

"Okay, then, I was wrong. I take back what I said."

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164 Ibid., 146.

Rather, she would quite reasonably let her assertion about what is rumoured stand “What a relief! But that was the rumor.”

Whereas in the other case about Joe being in Boston, it would be very odd if Sally did not do the following

“Joe might be in Boston.”

“No, he can’t be in Boston. I just saw him an hour ago in Berkeley.”

“Okay, then, scratch that. I was wrong.”<sup>165</sup>

3. The third problem is simply that we sometimes argue about modal claims, such as if we were to argue about whether Joe might be in Boston. Crucially, the participants of such a dispute take themselves to be disagreeing when one says ‘he might be in Boston’ and one says ‘no, he can’t be’. They do not understand each other as reporting simply what they know.

Broadly speaking all three problems are different aspects of the same weakness: solipsistic contextualism takes modal claims to be saying something grounded in the individual’s body of knowledge, but if this is the case we can’t make sense of disagreement between two people with different such bodies of knowledge.

MacFarlane examines the idea that the main problem with solipsistic contextualism is the ‘solipsism’ element. What if we were to give a different account, whereby we were still ‘context of use’ contextualists, but this time we widened the idea of use to something like a relevant group of users.

However this is problematic when we take the case of you overhearing Sally say that ‘Joe

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 148.

might be in Boston'. You think 'she has spoken falsely'. To make sense of this, the nonsolipsistic contextualist must include you in the relevant group, even though you have not been noticed by Sally or her interlocutor. So the relevant group includes anyone in earshot. But why stop there, asks MacFarlane? A slippery slope argument develops quickly:

And why limit ourselves to earshot? It doesn't matter much to our story that you are in the same room as Sally. You'd assess her claim the same way if you were thousands of miles away, listening through a wiretap. Indeed, it seems to me that it does not even matter whether you are listening to the wiretap live or reviewing a recording the next day—or the next year. To vindicate all these third-party assessments, the Nonsolipsistic Contextualist would have to extend the relevant group of knowers not just to those in earshot, but to all those who will one day hear of, read of, or perhaps even conjecture about, Sally's claim. There's no natural stopping point short of that.<sup>166</sup>

After this preliminary look at competing views, MacFarlane once again sets up a double pull in equally convincing directions. If we focus on what speakers take themselves to have warrant in asserting, the solipsistic contextualism seems correct. But it cannot account for retraction or disputes. For that we need less solipsism. But when we do that, we can no longer account for the things that originally motivated our solipsistic contextualism. MacFarlane calls this a paradox:

although the truth of a claim made using epistemic modals must depend somehow on what is known—that is what makes it 'epistemic'—it does not seem to depend on any particular body of knowledge.<sup>167</sup>

After reviewing various expressivist (Simon Blackburn)<sup>168</sup> and 'force-modifier' approaches (Huw Price),<sup>169</sup> MacFarlane claims both that they can work only by ruling out truth-conditional

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166 *Ibid.*, 151.

167 *Ibid.*, 155.

168 *Ibid.*, 159.

169 *Ibid.*, 156.

approaches, and also by supposing that truth conditional approaches must have the sort of contextualist shape that he looks at in the first half of the paper. At this stage he introduces ‘bicontextuality’<sup>170</sup> which is the now familiar (to us) move of recognising that contexts are already in play, namely the context of use, and asking why not introduce a second context, the context of assessment. As in the other areas, this move yields the required result.

It is probably obvious where this is going. We started with the intuitively compelling idea that the truth of epistemic modal claims depends on what is known. That is why they are called ‘epistemic’. But we ran into trouble when we tried to answer the question, ‘known to whom?’ for it seemed that people tend to assess epistemic modal claims for truth in light of what they (the assessors) know, even if they realize that they know more than the speaker (or relevant group) did at the time of utterance. A straightforward way to account for this puzzling fact is to suppose that epistemic modals are assessment-sensitive: the truth of an epistemic modal claim depends on what is known by the assessor, and thus varies with the context of assessment. On this view, epistemic modal claims have no ‘absolute’ truth values, only assessment-relative truth values. This is why they resist being captured in standard frameworks for truth-conditional semantics.<sup>171</sup>

## **2.4 The System’s Development**

We need to point out a couple of changes that occur as MacFarlane develops his system. The first is that he shifts from the evasive language of ‘utterance’ in ‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’ to the more concrete talk of proposition and content in ‘Making Sense of Relative Truth’ and ‘Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths’ for example. Secondly, there is the issue of ‘postsemantics’, a term that seems indigenous to MacFarlane’s writing, but subsequently

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 177.



disappears after 2003.

### 2.4.1 Proposition and Utterance

Is MacFarlane's relativism about propositions, or utterances and sentences? What is the relation between these and what is at stake? 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth' can be confusing in this regard, since all the talk is of sentences, and utterances. MacFarlane's relativism seems to be concerned with utterance truth. But one tradition has it that it is the content of such an utterance or sentence, after we have dispensed with the vagary caused by the context in which such an utterance is made, is the real truth bearer. Any interesting relativism about truth should be about such content, which the tradition has it, is a proposition. A proposition, therefore, is the content of an utterance or sentence at a context.

And yet as García-Carpintero notes, '[MacFarlane's] (2003) publication studiously avoids talk of propositions, officially speaking instead of utterances'.<sup>172</sup> By 'Making Sense of Relative Truth' (2005) however he has shifted to propositions, in that paper he makes the following definition: 'Relativism about truth is the view that there is at least one assessment-sensitive sentence', which has the following subdivision 'a propositional relativist holds that there is at least one assessment-sensitive proposition' adding that 'In what follows, I will focus on propositional relativism, which seems to me more promising in its applications'.<sup>173</sup>

Back in 'Making Sense of Relative Truth', MacFarlane did not seem worried about whether his relativism concerned sentences or propositions, arguing that 'Relativism about truth, I will argue, is the view that truth (of sentences or propositions) is relative not just to contexts of use but also to contexts of assessment'.<sup>174</sup> Section 4.7 of 'Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths' addresses

<sup>172</sup> García-Carpintero, "Relativism, Vagueness and What Is Said," 135.

<sup>173</sup> MacFarlane, "Making Sense of Relative Truth," 312.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

this same issue, admitting that it is ‘not at all clear’ in ‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’ whether he intended utterances or propositions to be relativised.<sup>175</sup> In fact, it is not entirely true that MacFarlane completely avoids talk of propositions as García-Carpintero claims, rather he switches to talk of propositions during his discussion of the absoluteness principle.<sup>176</sup>

MacFarlane gives us two versions of what he might have meant in his attempt to motivate the determinacy intuition, namely that today, as we look at the sea battle, we observe that what Jack said yesterday was true (albeit with a different example). As can be seen below, we can interpret the determinacy intuition as applying to utterances, or content (propositions). Those two versions are:

(27) Yesterday I uttered the sentence “It will be sunny tomorrow.”

It is sunny today.

So my utterance was true.

(28) Yesterday I asserted that it would be sunny today.

It is sunny today.

So what I asserted was true.

MacFarlane asks:

which of these arguments did I intend in FCRT? That is not at all clear. In the technical part of the paper, I talked of sentences and utterances, not propositions. Officially, then, the argument ought to have been something like (27). But this is not what one finds in the (less formal) part of the paper where the argument is first presented:

(29) Jake asserted yesterday that there would be a sea battle today.

There is a sea battle today.

So Jake’s assertion was true. (325)

<sup>175</sup> MacFarlane, “Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths,” 93.

<sup>176</sup> MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” 328.

I think there is a reason I slipped into proposition talk in giving the retrospective assessment argument, despite my efforts to avoid it elsewhere. I was trying to elicit the intuition that the retrospective assessment of Jake's prediction as true was a natural one—something no ordinary person would reject. And in ordinary speech, truth and falsity are almost invariably predicated of propositions, as in the following:

(30) What he said is false.

(31) Nothing George asserted in his talk is true.

(32) I know you believe he's dishonest, but that's false.

(33) It's true that it has been a hot summer.

(34) That was a false claim.<sup>177</sup>

What we might expect from the traditional view is that context of use helps us to get from sentence to proposition, and thus truth value. Context of assessment has no such link to truth. And while the truth of a sentence may vary with the proposition it expresses (because of the varying context of use), the truth value of a proposition is fixed. However MacFarlane rejects the idea that just because the proposition is the truth bearer, that means it should also have an intrinsic or absolute fixed truth value:

Propositions are often said to be the "primary bearers of truth value." What this means is that anything else that is true or false is so in virtue of expressing a proposition that is true or false. It does not mean that propositions have their truth values absolutely or intrinsically. In standard frameworks, propositions are taken to have truth values only relative to "circumstances of evaluation"—here, possible worlds. In our semantic metalanguage, then, we will have a two-place propositional truth predicate: "proposition *p* is true at circumstance of evaluation (or world) *w*".<sup>178</sup>

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177 MacFarlane, "Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths," 93–4.

178 *Ibid.*, 94–5.

So what is the truth bearer for MacFarlane? And what should we take his relativism to be about? Is it the particular sentence token, such as a particular acoustic blast, or a sentence written on paper? No, says MacFarlane in 'Making Sense of Relative Truth', for even such a token, such as the note on my door can have different truth values on different occasions of use, the example given is the note on his door saying 'I'll be back in a minute'.<sup>179</sup>

What about the act, the utterance for instance? Not this either, even though this is what seems meant in 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth'. In 'Making Sense of Relative Truth' and 'Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths' though, MacFarlane realises that there is something odd about describing an act rather than the content of the act as true or false. It must therefore be propositions, or utterance content.

One final upshot of the switch that MacFarlane makes from utterance to proposition is that his case in 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth' against supervaluationism is no longer persuasive as it stands. As he writes:

In FCRT, I talked only of sentences and utterances, not of propositions. This made my case against supervaluationism easier than it should have been. In what follows, I'll show how to deal with propositions and propositional truth in a branching framework, and I'll explain how the supervaluationist might evade my criticism regarding retrospective assessments of future-tensed assertions by talking of proposition truth rather than utterance truth.<sup>180</sup>

Supervaluation is a way of affirming truth value gaps in cases such as future contingents, (or originally, in vague terms), while still retaining logical basics such as the law of the excluded middle. As is explained in 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth', Thomason's possible worlds driven supervaluationism is one such attempt.<sup>181</sup> A statement about future contingents is counted

<sup>179</sup> MacFarlane, "Making Sense of Relative Truth," 306.

<sup>180</sup> MacFarlane, "Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths," 82.

<sup>181</sup> Richmond H. Thomason, "Indeterminist Time and Truth-Value Gaps," *Theoria* 36, no. 3 (1970): 264–281.

true (false) if true (false) in all possible futures. Future contingents are thus gappy. But the disjunction ‘there will be a sea battle *or* there will not be a sea battle’ remains true.

‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’ rejected such an account because it gave incorrect verdicts for retrospective assessments of future claims. It violates the intuition that because there turned out to be a sea battle today, what you said yesterday was true. Supervaluationism has to say that because the sea battle and peace were open possibilities when you made your utterance, then what you said was not true.

But the supervaluationist can resist this given MacFarlane’s change of heart regarding propositions:

As we have seen, supervaluationism gives the “wrong” retrospective assessments of truth for past utterances of future contingents. But if I am right that utterance truth is a technical notion that plays no important role in our ordinary thought and talk, then the supervaluationist can accept these consequences without being revisionist about our ordinary future-directed talk. What really matters is whether supervaluationism can vindicate our retrospective assessments of the truth of propositions.<sup>182</sup>

So imagine that yesterday I said it would be sunny today. What should the supervaluationist say about this? Do I speak truly when I say ‘what I said yesterday was true’? Since we are now talking about propositions, a supervaluationist can assign the same truth value today to the statement that ‘what I said yesterday was true’, and ‘It is sunny today’. Given that our subject is propositions, supervaluationism has no problem.

In ‘Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths’ MacFarlane introduces a further, new argument against the supervaluationists, to the effect that their theory cannot make sense of an actuality operator (‘actually’), but this need not concern us here.

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182 MacFarlane, “Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths,” 94.

## 2.4.2 What Does Post-Semantics Mean?

MacFarlane uses a term for the semantic level at which his relativisation is supposed to operate, and it is ‘post-semantics’. But what could this mean? It occurs in his dissertation of 2000,<sup>183</sup> and in ‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’ it makes another appearance. The fact that the relativisation occurs at this level MacFarlane calls post-semantics is supposed to be a point in its favour, since it ‘leave[s] the semantics proper just as it is’.<sup>184</sup> This is a bonus, since a natural worry that can be raised about such relativism as MacFarlane’s is that it makes an assault on our traditional model of logic and/or semantics. However MacFarlane plays these changes down:

That is, we need the post-semantics to define *truth at a context of utterance and context of assessment*, instead of merely *truth at a context of utterance*. But this change in the *definiendum* of the post-semantics is the only change that is required.<sup>185</sup>

The relativisation occurs after the standard semantic model. Truth doesn’t need to mean anything different than what standard semantic accounts take it to mean. But what does post-semantic mean? Post-semantics appears to have its origin in MacFarlane’s dissertation, ‘What does it mean to say that logic is formal?’ MacFarlane presents us with a semantic trichotomy, pre-semantics, semantics proper, and post-semantics. Pre-semantics should be understood along the lines that Belnap laid in ‘Under Carnap’s Lamp’, that is, the realm to which belong ‘pure theories of values’, examples of which are Carnap’s extensions and intensions.<sup>186</sup> Let us start off with a general account of what MacFarlane means by ‘post-semantics’, with this early passage from his doctoral

<sup>183</sup> John MacFarlane, “What Does It Mean to Say That Logic Is Formal?” (University of Pittsburgh, 2000).

<sup>184</sup> MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” 330.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> ‘By “pre-semantics,” I understand (after Belnap) that part of semantic theory that makes no reference to linguistic expressions or their use’. MacFarlane, J. (2000). What does it mean to say that logic is formal? Department of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh. **PhD**: 328.

dissertation

The distinction between post-semantics and semantics proper is more prominent, even in classical logic, if we attend to proprieties of inference rather than assertion. It is clear that when we have given an account of how the semantic values of complex expressions depend on the semantic values of their parts, we do not yet have an account of implication. Something more is required: the definition of implication as truth-preservation in all interpretations (in classical languages), or as the preservation of some relation ( $\leq$ ) defined on the multivalues (in multivalued languages), or as the preservation of truth at every context of utterance on every interpretation (in modal languages). This further step belongs to post-semantics. The role of post-semantics, then, is to mediate between the semantic values required for the purposes of compositional semantics and the fundamental semantic notions in terms of which the use of language (e.g., proprieties of assertion and inference) is to be explained. The task of post-semantics imposes further constraints on the basic semantic types, beyond the constraints imposed by semantics proper. For example, in a multivalued logic, there must be a distinction between designated and undesignated values in  $V$  (or some other way of going from ingredient truth values to stand-alone truth values). And there must be a relation  $\leq$  on multivalues by means of which implication can be defined. (Sometimes the distinction between designated and undesignated can perform this function, but not always.)<sup>187</sup>

What I gather from this is that post-semantics is supposed to mediate between compositional semantics and the use of language. Post-semantics is a level that MacFarlane introduces between what he calls semantics proper, which gives us ‘truth at a point’, and the theory of assertion, or speech acts, which can then be developed in abstraction from the semantics and post-semantics. Up until now, it seems, MacFarlane thinks that post-semantics only handled ‘truth at a context of utterance’. Interestingly MacFarlane claims that this change in the *definiendum* of post-semantics, to incorporate double time reference need not change anything in the semantics, nor is it committed to saying that there are any ‘a-contextual’ sentences. Its benefit is that if there are any, it can deal with them. However merely making room for a-contextual sentences does not commit us to their

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<sup>187</sup> MacFarlane, “What Does It Mean to Say That Logic Is Formal?,” 226–7.

existence. As he writes,

if one's definition of 's is true at context of utterance u and context of assessment a' makes no reference to a, no sentence in the language will be a-contextual. Thus an advocate of the absoluteness of utterance-truth has nothing to fear from the freedom it gives us.<sup>188</sup>

Post-semantics is the mediator between

the semantic values required for the purposes of compositional semantics and the fundamental semantic notions in terms of which the use of language (e.g., proprieties of assertion and inference) is to be explained.<sup>189</sup>

MacFarlane gives the following example: in classical logic, post-semantics is what specifies implication. The compositional truth-values of sentences are not enough. A further stipulation, which is a part of post-semantics, that implication is truth-preservation from premises to conclusion in all interpretations is needed.<sup>190</sup>

### 2.4.3 The Standard View of Semantics/Pragmatics

Post-semantics, it seems, is supposed to mediate between semantics proper and pragmatics. The confusion arises because this doesn't map on at all well to the traditional understanding, which is represented below by some prominent philosophers from Carnap to Kaplan. The history of the terms is given by Montague as follows:

The word 'pragmatics' was used in Morris for that branch of philosophy of language which involves, besides linguistic expressions and the objects to which they refer, also the users of the expressions and the possible

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<sup>188</sup> MacFarlane, "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," 331.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>190</sup> MacFarlane, "What Does It Mean to Say That Logic Is Formal?," 225.



contexts of use. The other two branches, syntax and semantics, dealing respectively with expressions alone and expressions together with their reference, had already been extensively developed by the time at which Morris wrote, the former by a number of authors and the latter in Tarski.<sup>191</sup>

Carnap in *Introduction to Semantics* (1942) put the distinction as follows:

If in an investigation explicit reference is made to the speaker, or, to put it in more general terms, to the user of a language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics. (...) If we abstract from the user of the language and analyze only the expressions and their designata, we are in the field of semantics. And if, finally, we abstract from the designata also and analyze only the relations between expressions, we are in (logical) syntax.<sup>192</sup>

As we can see, on the traditional understanding, context of use is applied at the pragmatic level, following the suggestion from Peirce that pragmatics should handle indexicals.<sup>193</sup> In *Synthese*, 22 Stalnaker proposes the following distinction between the three terms:

Syntax studies sentences, semantics studies propositions. Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed. There are two major types of problems to be solved within pragmatics: first, to define interesting types of speech acts and speech products; second, to characterize the features of the speech context which help determine which proposition is expressed by a given sentence.<sup>194</sup>

Finally, Kaplan in 'Demonstratives' :

The fact that a word or phrase has a certain meaning clearly belongs to semantics. On the other hand, a claim about the basis for ascribing a certain meaning to a word or phrase does not belong to semantics... Perhaps, because it relates to how the language is used, it should be categorized as part of ... *pragmatics* ..., or perhaps,

191 Richard Montague, "Pragmatics and Intensional Logic," *Synthese* 22, no. 1/2, Semantics of Natural Language (1970): 68.

192 Rudolf Carnap, *Introduction to Semantics* (Harvard University Press, 1942), 8.

193 Montague, "Pragmatics and Intensional Logic," 68.

194 Robert C. Stalnaker, "Pragmatics," *Synthese* 22, no. 1/2, Semantics of Natural Language (1970): 275.

because it is a fact about semantics, as part of ... *Metasemantics*.<sup>195</sup>

#### 2.4.4 Is Post-Semantics Necessary?

So as we can see, the traditional view would have it that context and index are issues that are handled by pragmatics. MacFarlane claims that contexts are handled at an in-between level called post-semantics. The motivation for this is unclear, certainly it seems to have roots in Carnap's work, and Belnap's paper about 'flat pre-semantics'. But does this somewhat obscure concept do any other work? After 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth', this term no longer appears, and yet, the same model for relative truth is propounded in papers from 'Making Sense of Relative Truth' through to current and forthcoming papers,<sup>196</sup> and so perhaps we need not concern ourselves with it. After all, the attraction of studying MacFarlane's system is that it gives us a fairly general and reasonably straightforward way of formulating truth-relativism, however this is compromised if we have to rewrite the distinctions between semantics and pragmatics, via the introduction of baroque and obscure neologisms.

#### 2.4.5 Evans' Challenge

In his paper 'Does Tense Logic Rest upon a Mistake?'<sup>197</sup> Evans challenges tensed logic, or broadly the idea that time itself might be a context, and his charge is bluntly that such a view is incomprehensible. As MacFarlane notes, this challenge is broad enough as to apply to his own

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<sup>195</sup> Kaplan et al., *Themes from Kaplan*, 573.

<sup>196</sup> Although it reappears in the most recent rendition of the system, in MacFarlane's recent introduction to Relativism. However it still has no real accompanying explanation as to its necessity. John MacFarlane, "Relativism," in *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language*, ed. Gillian Russell and Delia Graff Fara (Routledge, 2012), 132–142.

<sup>197</sup> Evans, *Collected Papers*.

model of double contextuality, since in essence his context of assessment introduces a second time, the moment of assessment, which the truth of an assertion is to be relative to.

Generally, Evans' target is the tense-logic inaugurated by A.N. Prior, whose fundamental contention is that the past or future tense verb is 'out of the same box as' such terms as 'not', 'not the case that', and 'possible'. Thus for Prior, talking about 'truth at time t' is parallel to talking about 'truth with respect to possible world w'.

Evans criticises the view that the 'evaluation of an utterance as correct or incorrect depends upon the time the evaluation is made'. Evans' particular target is the view that Geach attributes to the Stoics and Scholastics in his review of Benson Mates' *Stoic Logic*.<sup>198</sup> The attributed view is that, an untensed proposition such as 'Socrates is sitting' is a complete proposition which is sometimes true and sometimes false, 'not an incomplete expression requiring a further phrase like "at time t" to make it into an assertion'.<sup>199</sup>

Evans writes that such assertion would not admit of a stable evaluation as correct or incorrect; if we are to speak of correctness or incorrectness at all we must say that the assertion is correct at some times and not at others. MacFarlane notes that although this view is not one he accepts, the criticism is broad enough to potentially cause him discomfort. 'The particular view Evans criticises is manifestly implausible, but the grounds on which he criticises this view are general enough to apply to any view on which the truth of utterances is relativised to a context of assessment, including the view advocated here'.<sup>200</sup> Evans writes that:

Such a conception of assertion is not coherent. In the first place, I do not understand the use of our ordinary word 'correct' to apply to one and the same historical act at some times and not at others, according to the state of the weather. Just as we use the terms 'good' and 'bad', 'obligatory' and 'permitted' to make an assessment, once and

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198 P.T. Geach, "Review of B.Mates *Stoic Logic*," *Philosophical Review* 64 (1955).

199 P.T. Geach, "Review of Nicolaus of Autrecourt. *A Study in 14th Century Thought*. By Julius Rudolph Weinberg," *Mind* 58, no. 230, New Series (1949): 244; Prior, *Past, Present and Future*, 15.

200 MacFarlane, "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," 332.

for all, of non-linguistic actions, so we use the term 'correct' to make a once-and-for-all assessment of speech acts. Secondly, even if we strain to understand the notion 'correct-at-t', it is clear that a theory of meaning which states the semantic values of particular utterances solely by the use of it cannot serve as a theory of sense. If a theory of reference permits a subject to deduce merely that a particular utterance is now correct, but later will be incorrect, it cannot assist the subject in deciding what to say, nor in interpreting the remarks of others. What should he aim at, or take the others to be aiming at? Maximum correctness? But of course, if he knew an answer to this question, it would necessarily generate a once-and-for-all assessment of utterances, according to whether or not they meet whatever condition the answer gave. [end of MacFarlane's quotation] In fact, we know what he should do; he should utter sentence types true at the time of utterance. One who utters the sentence type 'it is raining' rules out dry weather only at the time of utterance; he does not rule out later dryness, and hence there can be no argument from the later state of the weather to a reappraisal of his utterance. Utterances have to be evaluated according to what they rule out, and so different utterances of the same tensed sentences made at different times may have to be evaluated (once and for all) differently. They cannot therefore all be assigned the same semantic value.<sup>201</sup>

MacFarlane doesn't just reject absoluteness, though, but also bivalence, since he wants to maintain that the same proposition changes truth value from indeterminate to true. Rephrasing Evans, MacFarlane puts the objection in the following way. We aim to make sincere assertions, and this is equated with aiming to speak the truth. If the sentence is a-contextual though, there is no non-relativised fact of the matter as to whether our assertion is true or not, true relative to some contexts, untrue relative to others. How can we aim to speak the truth then? At best we can aim to speak the truth as assessed from such and such a context. But  $C_u$  does not pick out a uniquely relevant  $C_a$ . if it did we would not need to relativise truth to a context of assessment at all, the  $C_u$  would provide all the info we needed to get the truth value.

Kölbel rephrases the relevant part of Evans' challenge more clearly:

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<sup>201</sup> Evans, *Collected Papers*, 349–50.

The difficulty Evans sees is this: we must, in making and interpreting assertions, be able to make sense of the idea that the assertion is correct, so that we can aim to assert correctly (as speakers) or expect an assertion to be correct (as audience). However, if it is relative to perspectives whether the content expressed by an assertoric utterance is true, then there seems to be no sense in which the utterance can be correct or incorrect. The only way it could would be either in relation to some particular perspective or in relation to some, most or all perspectives. But if we were aiming for correctness in relation to some specific perspective  $p_1$ , perhaps because it is related in some way to the context of utterance, then correctness would no longer be relative to perspectives because an utterance would be absolutely correct just if it is correct in relation to  $p_1$ . The same goes for the quantificational options: if we were aiming for correctness in relation to some (most, every) perspective, then we would after all have an absolute correctness condition: an utterance is absolutely correct just if it is correct in relation to some (most, every) perspective. Thus, the idea of contents of assertion that have relative correctness (or truth) conditions is incoherent.<sup>202</sup>

The issue here that MacFarlane and Kölbel describe in slightly different ways is one of coherence. MacFarlane picks up on the assertion issue, and makes the problem out to be simply this: if there are any number of possible contexts in which the sentence can be now true, now false, then there is no way that relative truth can play its leading role, which is, according to Evans, to be that at which we aim in assertion. As MacFarlane puts it,  $C_u$  (context of utterance) does not pick out a unique  $C_a$  (context of assessment). Imagine a target in an archery contest. If such a target moved, or perhaps if there were several possible targets and the archer only found out later if he had aimed at (let alone hit) the correct one, we would want to say there was something very odd, perhaps incoherent about such an archery contest. As far as MacFarlane is concerned, Evans' charge is one of incoherence based on the failure of relative truth to be able to fit one of the basic roles of truth, that is, the aim of assertions.

I think that Kölbel's reading is slightly differently though, not in disagreement with MacFarlane but perhaps emphasising a different aspect. He agrees that the issue is truth as the goal

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<sup>202</sup> Kölbel, "Faultless Disagreement," 308.

of assertion. But the problem as he puts it is, if an assertion is true relative to a perspective, (for present purposes a perspective can be read as the same as a context of assessment –  $C_a$ ) then the assertion is correct or incorrect in relation to one, some or maybe all perspectives. But once we specify which perspective it is correct in relation to (which we should do if our claim is that truth is relative) then it seems that we no longer have relative truth, but absolute truth conditions for perspective 1,2,3 or 4 etc. Although he starts from the same place, Kölbel seems to think that the charge is more related to the idea that relative truth somehow implicitly rests on a statement of absolute truth if it can be stated at all.

In any case we can see Evans' objection therefore not as the traditional self-refutation charge, but nonetheless a similar charge, that in relativising truth we multiply infinitely what the term could mean, so as to lose any sense of what the term does in fact mean. If truth is relative to a context of assessment, which in principle could be different every single time, then truth becomes entirely particular, and hence a vacuous term. MacFarlane takes the charge to be one of multiplication leading to incoherence, or the loss of the peculiar sense of truth. Kölbel on the other hand seems to think that the charge is that any account of relative truth lapses back into an account of absolute truth.

As we will see, MacFarlane's response is essentially to accept Evan's argument, but claim that it only shows that a-contextuality is incompatible with a particular picture of assertion. In such an account's place he offers a Brandomian account. It is interesting to note that if I am right about Kölbel reading this argument slightly differently, and if in turn, Kölbel is right to read it that way, then this escape does not save MacFarlane, since the problem is not only one of the aim of assertion, but of the inseparability of the idea of relative truth from absolute truth. This point, however must remain an aside, since it is the aim of this thesis to pursue the Evans problem as MacFarlane reads it.

### 2.4.6 MacFarlane's Recourse to Brandom to Avoid Evans.

It is important to note here that MacFarlane in no way denies that Evans' objection would indeed be fatal, if he accepted that aiming at the truth was definitive of making an assertion. Therefore we can count it as accepted on all sides that the success of MacFarlane's relativism, and by extension his solution of the problem of future truth relies on his successful assimilation of Brandom's project.

The crux, as we have seen, of Evans' challenge is that MacFarlane cannot give a coherent answer to the question 'what should we aim at in assertion?' If we could give an answer to this, then the singular relativisation of an utterance would always be enough. As MacFarlane puts it, 'the postsemantics must tell us in what contexts of utterance a sentence is true (full stop); otherwise we can have no understanding of what someone might be aiming at in asserting it'.<sup>203</sup> However MacFarlane goes on to limit the conclusions that can be drawn from this, and the limit stops short of making his own theory incoherent. 'At most Evans' argument shows that a-contextuality is incompatible with a particular picture of assertion, on which assertion is like a game one can either win (by speaking the truth) or lose (by speaking falsely)'.<sup>204</sup>

In what follows, he refers us to Brandom<sup>205</sup> for an alternative account.<sup>206</sup> Making an assertion is bringing about a certain change in normative status. Assertion should be understood as making a commitment to the truth of the sentence asserted. But what does this mean? It only means committing oneself to producing a justification when challenged, and being obliged to withdraw the sentence if the challenge cannot be met. As we can see, the final paragraphs of 'Future Contingents

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203 MacFarlane, "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," 333.

204 Ibid., 334.

205 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*; Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: an Introduction to Inferentialism*.

206 MacFarlane, "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," note 16.

and Relative Truth' seek refuge from Evans in Brandom's 'deontic scorekeeping' account of assertion, which is the subject of Chapter Three, below.

In 'Making Sense of Relative Truth', MacFarlane presents his favoured view of assertion in more detail. The cornerstone of Evans' criticism, as we saw, was the idea of truth as the goal of assertion. MacFarlane traces this point to Dummett (1959)<sup>207</sup>, which he summarises thus:

Dummett pointed out that a set of T-biconditionals or a recursive definition of 'true in L' cannot simultaneously explain the meanings of the expressions of L and the meaning of 'true in L'. Thus, if our aim is to explain the meanings of expressions by showing how they contribute to the truth conditions of sentences containing them, we must have a grasp of the concept of truth that goes beyond what a Tarskian truth definition tells us. On Dummett's view, this grasp consists (at least in part) in our knowledge that the central convention governing the speech act of assertion is to assert only what is true.<sup>208</sup>

MacFarlane notes two things on foot of Dummett's point. First, not only the relativist, but also the absolutist owes us an account of the truth predicate. Second, Dummett does not define truth, but rather describes the role it plays in broader language use. According to MacFarlane, 'these two points suggest a strategy for the relativist: start with such an explication of truth (one that is acceptable to the non-relativist), then find a job for contexts of assessment in this framework'.<sup>209</sup>

However, MacFarlane argues that there are three strategies for attempting this, none of which are satisfactory<sup>210</sup>. He concludes that:

207 Dummett, "Truth."

208 MacFarlane, "Making Sense of Relative Truth," 313.

209 Ibid.

210 The three strategies MacFarlane outlines are as follows:

1. Relativise the aim of assertion to contexts of assessment: Relative to context  $C_A$ , assertion is governed by the convention that one should assert at context  $C_U$  only what is true relative to context of use  $C_U$  and context of assessment  $C_A$ .
2. Quantify over contexts: One should assert at  $C_U$  only what is true at context of use  $C_U$  and some/most/all contexts of assessment  $C_A$ .
3. Privilege one context of assessment (the one occupied by the asserter at the moment of utterance): One should assert at  $C_U$  only what is true at context of use  $C_U$  and context of assessment  $C_U$ .



there is no prospect of generalizing the Dummettian conception of truth as the aim of assertion in a way that makes assessment-relative truth intelligible. But it would be too hasty to conclude from this that relative truth talk is incoherent. We have only explored one approach to explicating truth talk (Dummett's), and we might reject this approach for reasons that have nothing to do with assessment sensitivity.<sup>211</sup>

Rather than focussing on the norms for making an assertion, as Dummett does, MacFarlane proposes that we focus on the normative consequences of making an assertion. So talk shifts from aiming at the truth in asserting, to commitment to the truth of what is asserted. Fleshing this out, MacFarlane enlists three Brandomian commitment principles which he labels 'W', 'J', and 'R'.

(W) Commitment to withdraw the assertion if and when it is shown to have been untrue.

(J) Commitment to justify the assertion (provide grounds for its truth) if and when it is appropriately challenged.

(R) Commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts on or reasons from what is asserted, and it proves to have been untrue.<sup>212</sup>

MacFarlane points out that simply having truth as the goal of assertion, along the model of some sort of game does not mean we cannot introduce a-contextuality. He gives as an example a game of multi player 'Rochambeau' (Rock, Paper, Scissors):

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The problem with 1 is that conventions supervene on patterns of mutual belief and expectation among the participants of a practice. Thus it merely replaces one unexplained relativism with another. Option 2 is intelligible, but 'some' is too easy, and 'all' is impossible, most, however is arbitrary, nor is it clear what it means. MacFarlane claims that option 3 is the choice of most relativists, including Kölbel (2002) and Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherston (2004). A single context of assessment is privileged, it seems this should be the context one occupies when making the assertion. MacFarlane writes that "Option 3 gives a significance to 'true at context of use  $C_U$  and context of assessment  $C_A$ ' only for the special case where  $C_U = C_A$ , and not for arbitrary  $C_U$  and  $C_A$ . As a result, it cannot help us to understand assessment sensitivity. Suppose two rival semantic theories, T1 and T2, agree about the truth value of S at a context of use  $C_U$  and context of assessment  $C_A$  whenever  $C_U = C_A$ , but disagree about the truth value of S at  $C_U$  and  $C_A$  for at least some context pairs such that  $C_U = C_A$ . According to T1, S is assessment-sensitive, while according to T2, it is not" Ibid., 314–6.

211 Ibid., 316.

212 Ibid., 318.

When I was young, my friends and I used to play multi-player Rochambeau. In this game, whether a move counts as winning varies from opponent to opponent. A play of 'rock' will win with respect to an opponent who plays 'scissors', but lose to one who plays 'paper'. Though one cannot aim to win simpliciter, the game is not incoherent. It is just different from games in which winning is not relativized to opponents. Similarly, I suggest, assertions of a-contextual sentences, whose truth varies from one context of assessment to another, are not incoherent: they are just different from assertions of non-a-contextual sentences. What we need is an account that does not rule them out from the start.<sup>213</sup>

The details of Brandom's inferentialism will be dealt with in Chapter Three, for present purposes we only need the barest of bones to understand the dialectical move that MacFarlane is making. Brandom's deontic scorekeeping model of discursive practice<sup>214</sup> is just the game of giving and asking for reasons. In such a game, the fundamental move is making a claim. Linguistic practice is distinguished by its according some performances the significance of claimings, and to treat a performance as an assertion is to treat it as the undertaking of a certain kind of commitment, doxastic or assertional commitment.<sup>215</sup>

Thus Brandom's account, like Dummett's, sees linguistic interaction on the model of a game. But unlike the model where the aim is to say something true, Brandom's model has four possible 'moves'.

1. You can make a declarative sentence, which functions as an assertion, where an assertion means you undertake to justify your claim if challenged, and you license further inferences. Your assertion may therefore function as the premise or conclusion of further inferences.
2. You may demand a justification for an assertion made by somebody else.
3. You may defer justificatory responsibility for a claim to another person.

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213 MacFarlane, "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," 334.

214 Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: an Introduction to Inferentialism*, 141.

215 *Ibid.*, 142.

4. You may recognise a claim as having been justified. You thus acknowledge it as a license to make further assertions.

We can see that these moves map on to those given to us by MacFarlane, in the style of W, J and R (above). On Brandom's account, 'the theoretical work typically done by semantic assessments according to correctness of representation and satisfaction of truth conditions is done by assessments of proprieties of inference'.<sup>216</sup>

The idea of inference license, and the keeping track of such licences is what Brandom comes to call 'deontic scorekeeping'. On his account, the conceptual role played by the original claim in the social practices of the community is determined by what further assertions that community would accept as appropriate justifications of it, and what assertions they would take it to license or justify. Thus, the participants in a linguistic community do not primarily aim at the truth in making assertions, nor do they compare the assertions of others with the truth, or so I will show in Chapter Three. Rather, deontic scorekeeping means that competent linguistic practitioners keep track of their own and others' commitments and entitlements. So

A performance deserves to count as having the significance of an assertion only in the context of a set of social practices with the structure of (in Sellars's phrase) a game of giving and asking for reasons.<sup>217</sup>

García-Carpintero views the relativisation of the truth of assertions to contexts of assessment as unacceptable for a similar reason to Evans, 'because they clash with intuitions about the nature of intentional acts that they give us no good grounds to abandon'.<sup>218</sup> García-Carpintero cites Evans as the originator of this objection, that 'we are not properly told what we should do, if we are told

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<sup>216</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, xvii.

<sup>217</sup> Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: an Introduction to Inferentialism*, 189.

<sup>218</sup> García-Carpintero, "Relativism, Vagueness and What Is Said," 141.

that orders should be obeyed, or promises complied with, or assertions should be true “from a given perspective”, i.e., as Evans puts it, now correct, but later incorrect, “according to the state of the weather”<sup>219</sup>.

García-Carpintero describes MacFarlane’s move towards Brandom as resorting to ‘a more convoluted conception of the norms of assertion’,<sup>220</sup> arguing that this places an ‘extra burden’ on relativism, although we are given no good reason to give up the other account of assertion.

However he does not explicitly address the merits of MacFarlane’s move here, rather focussing on Mark Richard’s account. Doubts are expressed about the adequacy of MacFarlane’s move, and an extra burden is gestured at. But what is this burden? Is MacFarlane’s move adequate?

Taking a hint from García-Carpintero, I want to explore what sort of ‘extra burden’ Brandom might place on MacFarlane’s system, in particular, I want to point towards two lines of criticism that will be explored later in this project.

Strictly speaking, we need not read Evans’ challenge as having anything particularly to do with truth, rather, his criticism arises purely because of what is meant by ‘aiming’. Therefore we must ask ourselves, is anything still aimed at in MacFarlane’s Brandomian account of assertion? Even if it is something entirely social, such as acceptance or justification, we could still run the example of the strange archery contest, described above. We said that Evans’ criticism was akin to saying that truth relative to a context of assessment is like an archery contest with a target that is only determined after the arrows have been shot. MacFarlane’s move is to reject the notion of aiming at the truth in assertion. So to take into account the idea of justification, suppose there is some other reason that the archer is shooting, perhaps to impress a girl in the stands. He no longer shoots in order to hit the target, but rather to impress the girl. But now, either he knows that she is the sort of girl who is impressed by good archers, or at least impressed by something (such as

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219 Ibid.

220 Ibid., 148.

shooting with flair), or else he has no idea how to accomplish his task. It seems that shifting the weight from aiming at the truth to giving and asking for reasons either still must aim at something, or else it is at a loss as to how to proceed. In short, if Evans' problem is read as pointing out the incompatibility of relativism and aiming *as such*, then any account of assertion either has something to aim at, in which case the problem re-emerges, or else it aims at nothing, which seems to fail to capture the structure and purpose of assertoric behaviour. A practice that has no goal or aim seems, literally, pointless.

Another way of putting this objection is to try to sketch the following simple dilemma. If truth has been replaced by certain linguistic norms of justification, then how is aiming at such norms not aiming at the truth, in which case the original problem arises again. But if truth is not describable in terms of justification, then what exactly is it that makes (in the case of the sea battle) my assertion indeterminate at  $M_0$ , but true at  $M_1$ ?

A second problem that we will explore is the relationship between the semantic account of truth that MacFarlane is working with in articulating his relativism, and the pragmatics that governs Brandom's account. Brandom is explicit about the fact that 'semantics should answer to pragmatics',<sup>221</sup> and at times, it seems that MacFarlane's pragmatist leanings also involve something like this view (although he disagrees with Brandom about the conclusions we ought to draw, as pragmatists).<sup>222</sup> I will ask whether truth relativisation is quite as exciting or interesting as it seems, even whether it is necessary at all, given what seems a rather heavy concession to pragmatism that MacFarlane has already made in taking the Brandomian route that he does. Essentially the question is, what is the point in relativising semantic truth, when you are a pragmatist who has semantics already demoted to the place of servant of social practices?

<sup>221</sup> For example at Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 143.

<sup>222</sup> John MacFarlane, "Pragmatism and Inferentialism," in *Reading Brandom: On Making It Explicit*, ed. Bernhard Weiss and Jeremy Wanderer, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2010).

### 3 Bandom's Pragmatism: Truth and Assertion

#### 3.1 Chapter Aim

Our investigation of relative truth has so far led us to the question of which norm governs assertion. In the face of a difficult challenge from Evans that directly attacks the idea of relative truth on the basis of it having a defective assertoric norm, MacFarlane has offered us a set of norms governing assertion that, instead of aiming at a particular thing, make certain commitments to justify or withdraw the assertion under certain circumstances. Although MacFarlane's rendition of this norm is brief, he directs us to Robert Bandom's work for detail, in particular the third chapter of *Making it Explicit*.<sup>223</sup> In this chapter, we will explore the reasons that Bandom gives us that set of norms for assertion. The two key ideas that we need to explain in Bandom's work are those of truth, and assertion. As we will see, they are heavily involved with one another, and Bandom's view on both is driven by his commitment to a pragmatist strategy we can describe as both *performative* and *antidescriptive*.

We will begin by describing this strategy in some detail, where the paradigm case will be that of truth; truth ascriptions will be understood in terms of the activity of ascribing rather than any property which is thereby ascribed. We will see that this strategy for Bandom is a general one not confined to truth. The stance against property ascription in favour of describing an activity quite naturally leads Bandom to hold a deflationary stance where truth as a property, or a relation holding between two objects is concerned. In Wolfgang Künne's terms, his position on truth is one of *nihilism*.<sup>224</sup> But as we shall see, Bandom still holds that truth-ascriptions are important expressive tools in our language. We shall therefore characterise him as a nihilist concerning the metaphysical *property* of truth, but not concerning truth's expressive function.

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<sup>223</sup> Bandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*.

<sup>224</sup> Wolfgang Künne, *Conceptions of Truth*, New Ed. (Clarendon Press, 2005).

The general pragmatist strategy pursued by Brandom privileges acts over properties. Where truth is concerned, this means the metaphysical property of truth is dispensed with, but the act of calling or taking something as true remains. At this stage we will be in a position to describe Brandom's theory of assertion, and also explain its importance to his system, for, it will emerge that 'taking-as-true' (which is the only meaningful vestige left to the idea of truth) will be more or less isomorphic with Brandom's description of what we do when we assert something. We will see that assertion dominates Brandom's linguistic theory, essentially replacing the concept of truth. In light of Brandom's anti-property stance, all we are left with is a heavily social set of norms that govern the activity of assertion, and these are the norms that influence those that MacFarlane recommends.

To sum up, what this chapter will show is that, under heavy pragmatist influence, Brandom rejects any traditional substantive notions of truth as a property, instead opting to focus on the act of calling something true or taking something as true. This activity is understood by Brandom as making assertions that commit us to certain things, entitle us to other things, and by which we undertake certain responsibilities. These commitments and entitlements make up the norms that govern the activity of assertion.

The overall point of the present project is to question John MacFarlane's account of relative truth. The particular point that we have focussed on is his response to Evans' problem concerning the norms of assertion according to truth relativism. Since MacFarlane defers to Brandom on this issue, we ought to find out what Brandom says. More than that though, the point of this chapter is to illustrate the tight connection between Brandom's norms of assertion, and his overall project, which as we will see, is a form of deflationary pragmatism. In the next and final chapter, we will go on to ask whether MacFarlane's reliance on Brandom's norms lead him on a path that is dangerously close to such a deflationary system, since, as we shall see in the next chapter, elements of Brandom's deflationary attitude are incompatible with the project of relative truth. On the surface,

there appears to be no problem with MacFarlane adopting Brandom-style norms, however this present chapter presents Brandom in sufficient detail to allow us to question that appearance more rigorously in the final chapter.

The layout of this chapter is as follows. We first give an introduction to Brandom's pragmatic system (3.2), explaining his motivation and aim, and also his links to Classical Pragmatism. The following section (3.3) explores the two main elements of Brandom's pragmatism, that is phenomenalism, and inferentialism. Armed with our detailed account of Brandom's system we question his particular stance on truth (3.4), finding it to be a deflationary account that draws heavily on the prosentential theory of Grover, Camp, and Belnap.<sup>225</sup> Finally we are in a position to assess the place of assertion in Brandom's system (3.5), finding that it is the central concept in Brandom's account of discursive practice, language, and sapience.

## 3.2 Introduction to Brandom's System<sup>226</sup>

### 3.2.1 Brandom's Pragmatic Project

Introducing his project in *Making it Explicit* Brandom writes:

One of the overarching methodological commitments that orients this project is to explain the *meanings* of linguistic expressions in terms of their *use* – an endorsement of one dimension of Wittgenstein's pragmatism. For although he drove home the importance of such an approach, other features of his thought – in particular his theoretical quietism – have discouraged his admirers from attempting to work out the details of a theory of meaning or, for that matter, of use.<sup>227</sup>

225 Dorothy L Grover, Joseph L Camp, and Nuel D Belnap, "A Prosentential Theory of Truth," *Philosophical Studies* 27, no. 2 (1975): 73 – 125.

226 Robert Brandom (b. 1950) is a leading American philosopher who writes about language, as well as the philosophy of mind, and logic. His PhD was supervised at Princeton by both Richard Rorty and David Lewis; Brandom's work bears the marks of the former's pragmatism, and the latter's preference for complex philosophical systems. He is also heavily influenced by Wilfred Sellars, and many historical figures, primarily Hegel, Kant, Wittgenstein and Frege. He is probably best known for his work on semantics, primarily in his major work, *Making it Explicit* (1994), the main themes of which are reprised in the more accessible *Articulating Reasons* (2000). He is also known for drawing on themes from historical figures, and his sometimes idiosyncratic reading of the philosophical tradition is advanced most notably in *Tales of The Mighty Dead* (2002).

227 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, xii–xiii.



For Brandom, as for many contemporary pragmatists, Wittgenstein's pragmatic insight, that 'meaning is use' is something of a touchstone. In *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein writes that 'For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language'.<sup>228</sup> This claim defines Pragmatism, and it is in keeping with the practical spirit of Peirce's 'pragmatic maxim', to 'Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object'.<sup>229</sup> This focus on use and practical outcome that is so central to the pragmatist project remains rather enigmatic without being further developed. Such an attempt at a detailed working-out of pragmatism's commitments is the thread that runs through all of Brandom's philosophy, and so defines his project.

A much earlier paper called 'Truth and Assertibility' gives us more detail concerning where Brandom sees his project in relation to the traditional approaches of philosophy. According to that paper, there are two opposing schools of thought in the philosophy of language.<sup>230</sup> To simplify somewhat, the two schools correspond to the early 'Tractatus Wittgenstein',<sup>231</sup> and the later 'Investigations Wittgenstein'.<sup>232</sup> The first approach is inspired by figures such as Bertrand Russell, Gottlob Frege and Rudolf Carnap. In formulating a theory of meaning, and in the philosophy of language in general, truth is the key concept for the first school of thought. The function of language is to represent things the way they really are, and so this first group focus on formal semantics, and truth conditions of sentences.

The second movement ('investigations' Wittgenstein), counter to this one, can be broadly

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228 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation*, 3rd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), sec. 43.

229 Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 5, paragraphs 388–410.

230 Robert Brandom, "Truth and Assertibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 6 (1976): 137–8.

231 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2001).

232 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

described as the pragmatist approach to the philosophy of language. It derives mainly from the American pragmatist John Dewey, and also Wittgenstein in his later period. This approach to meaning and language accords very little importance to the concept of truth. Rather, it views language as a set of social practices. Understanding language, in that case, means attending to the uses and circumstances of sentences. Rather than focussing on truth conditions, and semantics as the first group did, this second approach places ‘pragmatics’ (in the linguistic sense) to the fore. A later catchphrase of Brandom’s: ‘semantics answers to pragmatics’,<sup>233</sup> is traceable to this approach. The move away from the focus on semantics is also a move away from the concept of truth and truth conditions. This move has its roots in the approach of Dewey and the classical pragmatists,<sup>234</sup> who thought that everything useful that can be said about truth can be said about ‘warranted assertibility’, and so, the concept of truth can be discarded.<sup>235</sup> This move is echoed in Wittgenstein’s later work, since Wittgenstein often replaces the question ‘what are the facts’, along with talk of truth and representation, with questions of propriety such as ‘what are we entitled to say?’ and ‘what ought we to say?’

As we might expect, Brandom sides with the second approach. We will see details of his appropriation of classical pragmatism in 3.2.2, furthermore he draws heavily on figures such as Wittgenstein in formulating his approach to the concepts of meaning, truth, rationality, assertion, and language use. Both the focus on pragmatics over semantics, and the socio-normative over extra-social facts feature heavily.

Brandom’s interpretation of the pragmatists’ ‘meaning is use’ catchphrase crystallises in a broad approach that he calls ‘phenomenalism’, since it is a generalisation of the classical

233 ‘Semantics answers to pragmatics, attributions of content to explanations of use’ Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 188..

234 John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (Irvington Pub, 1980).

235 ‘If inquiry begins in doubt, it terminates in the institution of conditions which remove need for doubt. The latter state of affairs may be designated by the words belief and knowledge. For reasons that I shall state later I prefer the words “warranted assertibility”’. John Dewey, Larry Hickman, and Thomas M. Alexander, *The Essential Dewey: Ethics, Logic, Psychology* (Indiana University Press, 1998), 160.

pragmatists' approach to truth; it is 'phenomenalism' because they believe it is an analogous treatment to Berkeley's phenomenalism concerning matter. Even in *précis* we can see that this has the potential to be quite a convoluted term, and at worst it is misleading, since the way that Brandom uses it to designate a general pragmatic 'use-first' approach has little to do with the way that 'phenomenalism' is commonly understood in philosophy. Section 3.3 is devoted to explaining and re-branding Brandom's 'phenomenalism', which is a more detailed working out of the general pragmatist commitments that have been outlined here.

As well as the opposition that Brandom sketches in 'Truth and Assertibility', we can get a sense of his general approach from some more oppositions that are sketched by Brandom by way of introduction to the book *Articulating Reasons*,<sup>236</sup> which is *itself* styled as an 'Introduction to Inferentialism'. 'Inferentialism' is a term that is used by Brandom to refer to his general explanatory strategy concerning questions in the philosophy of language. As was the case with the problematic aforementioned 'phenomenalism', these technical labels serve to fill in the details of what we may roughly call Brandom's pragmatism. As such, we will examine their details in later sections.

The opening contrast in *Articulating Reasons* is between Platonism and Pragmatism concerning concepts.<sup>237</sup> Brandom's view is, he tells us, a sort of conceptual pragmatism. That is to say, it is an account of knowing *that* such and such is the case in terms of *how* to do something. In opposition to this stands 'Platonism', which Brandom describes as a view whereby concept acquisition involves a connection to some platonic entity. As we can see, this is a further aspect of Brandom's attempt to expound upon the 'meaning is use' theory. If his account of what it is to possess a concept involves appeal to features of its use, then we may also expect that in order to explain *what* is asserted when we make an assertion Brandom will appeal to features of the act of assertion rather than some sort of entity like a proposition. Analogously, what is *claimed* is to be

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236 Brandom, *Articulating Reasons : an Introduction to Inferentialism*.

237 *Ibid.*, 4.

understood in terms of *claiming*, and what is *judged* in terms of the act of *judging*.

### 3.2.2 Brandom's Relationship to Classical Pragmatism

A good place to begin our investigation into Brandom's relationship to classical pragmatism might be to look at how he himself characterises it. In 'Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk',<sup>238</sup> Brandom characterises classical pragmatism's approach to the question of truth generally as involving five theses. In addition to Brandom's characterisation, we will also draw on Susan Haack's characterisation of the classical pragmatist approach to truth, which also identifies five theses, though not the same five as Brandom.<sup>239</sup> Brandom's reading of history can be biased or slanted at times, as we shall see in section 3.2.3, below. It is often the case, as it is here, with his recounting of the core theses of classical pragmatism, that his historical antecedents have views which sound curiously similar to his own. Perhaps this is a conscious hermeneutic strategy of reading the great philosophers in light of this or that position or theory, but what Brandom's motivations are in this respect are not our concern here; suffice it to say that his *History of Philosophy* often brings to light unfamiliar issues and counterintuitive theses. Perhaps in the interests of attaining a less revised view of the history of pragmatism we should consult a second source, hence our consideration of Haack.

According to Brandom 'classical pragmatism', by which is meant, chiefly, William James, involves the following five separable theses about truth, which elaborate upon the essential point, that we should 'treat calling something true as doing something more like praising it than like

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238 Robert Brandom, "Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (1988): 75–93.

239 Susan Haack, "The Pragmatist Theory of Truth," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 27, no. 3 (1976): 231–249.

describing it'.<sup>240</sup>

1. The first of Brandom's five theses is what he calls the 'antidescriptive strategy', that is to say, pragmatism emphasises the performative act of calling something true rather than the descriptive content we might associate with what is true.
2. The second thesis is the personal angle of the act of calling something true, that is to say, such an act is a personal undertaking of 'a sort of normative stance or attitude'. This normative stance is characterised by Brandom in terms that he himself uses heavily in his own work: 'Taking some claim to be true is endorsing it or committing oneself to it'<sup>241</sup>.
3. The third thesis of classical pragmatism follows on from the second, as an understanding of that normative stance, whereby 'endorsing a claim is understood as adopting it as a guide to action' (ibid). 'Guide to action' here means that the endorsed claim is understood in terms of the role it plays in practical inference. Again, as we briefly alluded to above, the notion of inference is one that plays a key role in Brandom's elucidation of his own brand of pragmatism, and we will return to it when we investigate the details of that position.
4. The fourth strand of the classical pragmatists' treatment of truth is, according to Brandom the least important of the five, yet ironically it is the only strand that is acknowledged by stereotypical pragmatism. It is the idea that we ought to equate truth with use value. As Brandom puts it,

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240 Brandom, "Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk," 76.

241 Ibid., 77.

It is the view that an advantage of understanding the appropriateness or correctness of adopting an attitude of endorsement in terms of its role in guiding action consists in the possibility for some sort of not merely subjective measure of that appropriateness, namely, the success of the actions it leads to.<sup>242</sup>

5. The final of the five theses is more like a ‘meta-thesis’, since it is the claim that the acts of taking something as true, as understood along the lines of the previous theses 1-4, is all that there is to understand about truth. Brandom equates this deflationary attitude with the term ‘phenomenalism’, which we will approach in section 3.3. Furthermore, in section 3.4 we will investigate exactly what a deflationary attitude towards truth such as this one amounts to.

According to Susan Haack, the approach to truth taken by the classical pragmatists is also characterised by five theses, though she does not emphasise the same themes as Brandom.

By ‘the pragmatist theory of truth’ I shall understand a set of interlocking theses, to be found in the works of Peirce, Dewey, and James, which may together be regarded as constituting a theory of truth.<sup>243</sup>

Despite the dangers of speaking of ‘the’ pragmatist theory of truth, and the important differences between the protagonists, Haack believes that there is sense in which there is a theory that was ‘originally offered by Peirce and subsequently adopted by Dewey [and] was considerably extended by James’.<sup>244</sup> Peirce says a number of things about truth, as we will see below, but the thesis that is of interest to us, and which most often characterises pragmatism, is the thesis that says that the truth is what is satisfactory to believe, or what is good in the way of belief. The five interlocking theses that Haack thinks together make up classical pragmatism’s thinking about truth are the following, and she claims that Dewey held all of these, Peirce held 1-3, and James 2-4:

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Haack, “The Pragmatist Theory of Truth,” 142.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 142.

## Truth

1. is the end of inquiry
2. is correspondence with reality
3. is satisfactory to believe
4. is coherence with experience – verifiability [is a growing corpus]
5. entitles belief to be called 'knowledge'.”<sup>245</sup>

There is little overlap between Brandom's 5 theses, and Haack's although they both acknowledge and discuss the famous equation of use and truth. Apart from that, and perhaps because she is focussed on Peirce and Dewey rather than James exclusively (as Brandom is), she is more concerned with the relationship of truth to the ideas of the project of inquiry, experience, and knowledge. Brandom on the other hand is concerned with truth as something antidescriptive, preferring to describe it as an adoption of a normative attitude towards something by calling it true, an attitude which can serve as a guide to action. Haack's thesis (3) therefore corresponds to Brandom's thesis (4), which he told us was the most readily associated with classical pragmatism, and yet the least important. It was also the most quickly attacked of the theses associated with pragmatic truth. It can be summed up by James' famous 'there can *be* no difference that *makes* no difference' (James 1995, chap. 2). In more depth, from Peirce, we have the following argument:

...consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object ... let us ask what we mean by calling a thing *hard*. Evidently that it will not be scratched by many other substances. The whole conception of this quality, as of every other, lies in its conceived effects.<sup>246</sup>

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245 Ibid., 236.

246 Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian J. W. Kloesel (Indiana University Press, 1992), 132.

A contemporary response to this type of characterisation came from Bertrand Russell, who complained in 1908 that,

...if pragmatists only affirmed that utility is a *criterion* of truth, there would be much less to be said against their view ... The arguments of the pragmatists are almost wholly directed to proving that utility is a *criterion*; that utility is the *meaning* of truth is then supposed to follow.<sup>247</sup>

However, Haack argues that such a criticism is misplaced, and, despite Brandom's dismissal of this aspect of pragmatic truth as being the least important of the various theses, Haack's defence can help us shed light on the origins of one feature of Brandom's approach. That feature is the deliberate conflation of criterion and definition (meaning). Haack believes that Russell's criticism is inappropriate because 'the pragmatists' view of meaning is such that a dichotomy between definitions and criteria would have been entirely unacceptable to them'.<sup>248</sup> We saw already, above, that Peirce saw the meaning as something given by reference to experiential consequences. According to Haack, Peirce even went so far as to regard this as *the* fundamental tenet of pragmatism.<sup>249</sup> There are surely interesting questions, and problematic elements associated with such a move, however, as Haack points out, one thing is clear: this position doesn't allow for a distinction between what 'true' means, and what difference it would make whether a sentence were true or false. As Haack has it,

the criticism that the pragmatists 'confuse' definition and criteria is totally inappropriate, since their theory of meaning quite deliberately equates the two; if this *is* a confusion, it must be shown, by a critique of their theory of meaning, *why* it is.<sup>250</sup>

247 Bertrand Russell, "William James's Conception of Truth," in *William James: Pragmatism, in Focus*, ed. William James and Doris Olin (Routledge, 1992), 203.

248 Haack, "The Pragmatist Theory of Truth," 144–5.

249 *Ibid.*, 145.

250 *Ibid.*



In the next section we will see that one of the defining elements of Brandom's as-yet-to-be-clarified 'phenomenalism' will be a focus on this strategy of equating meaning and practical effects, not just in his definition of truth, but more broadly, in other areas too. It is in this respect that Brandom draws on the doctrines of classical pragmatism, as well as his 'meta-thesis' number five, that there is nothing more to understanding truth than the other theses he outlines, such as the performative aspect. The idea that 'there is no more to truth than...' generally heralds the approach to truth-theorising known as Deflationism, which, as we will see in section 3.4 is the correct characterisation of Brandom's own approach to truth.

### 3.2.3 Brandom's Ultimate Aim

We have focussed rather narrowly on some of the philosophical moves and insights that influence Brandom's pragmatism, namely the classical pragmatists' account of truth. But maybe we should briefly take a step back from all that, in order to say what Brandom's more general motivation is. We have learned that he is a pragmatist, that he wants to make sense of the 'meaning is use' dictum, and also that he draws on a long tradition. In the next section we are going to see the details of his own pragmatism. It is all very well to say that Brandom's approach is pragmatic, but we may still wonder – his approach to what? What is Brandom's ultimate aim? What are the philosophical problems and issues that he is trying to solve? The project in *Making It Explicit*, Brandom's *magnum opus* at least is to argue that things like actions (both linguistic and non-linguistic), and other rational and mental phenomena such as intentions, meanings, beliefs, and desires ought to be explained by appealing to the system of interconnections between them, rather than by relations such as reference to, and representation of things in the world. This strategy of

focussing on interconnections is what is meant by Brandom's 'inferentialist' project, the meaning of which will be addressed in the next section. The phenomena listed above have a common thread though – they can all be seen as playing a part in a description of rationality, what it is to be human, and so on. This is the 'big question' that Brandom's endeavours are aimed at; he wants to answer the question 'who are we?'. In *Making It Explicit* he writes that 'we are the creatures who say "we" - who can explicitly take or treat someone as one of us'.<sup>251</sup> There must be some basis on which we count somebody as one of 'us', part of our linguistic, social, or otherwise defined group. Brandom's general project asks what that basis is, in other words,

what would have to be true – not only of the quaint folk across the river, but of chimpanzees, dolphins, gaseous extraterrestrials, or digital computers (things in many ways quite different from the rest of us) – for them nonetheless to be correctly counted among us? ... What is it we do that is so special?<sup>252</sup>

Beliefs, desires and intentions are all elements of what Brandom calls *Sapience*, which, rather than *Sentience* is what constitutes our particular kind of rationality.<sup>253</sup> Kevin Scharp explains that

According to Brandom, sapience must be explained by appeal to the way groups of rational agents interact with one another. That is, rationality is a social achievement; it is the kind of thing that can be had only by groups of individuals.<sup>254</sup>

Brandom himself writes that 'sapience of the sort distinctive of us is a status achieved within a structure of mutual recognition: of holding and being held responsible'.<sup>255</sup> The activity that goes on

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<sup>251</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 275.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>254</sup> Kevin Scharp, "Ch. 4 Robert Brandom: Inference and Meaning," in *Philosophical Profiles in the Theory of Communication*, ed. Jason Hannan, First printing. (Peter Lang Publishing, 2012).

<sup>255</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 275.

in such groups of individuals is called *discursive practice* by Brandom,<sup>256</sup> and it is both necessary and sufficient to describe sapience. In answer to what this practice amounts to, Brandom answers with a phrase from Sellars, he writes that ‘to be rational is to play the game of giving and asking for reasons’.<sup>257</sup> This game, as we will see, is in turn defined by the activities of making assertions, and keeping score of the commitments that such assertions confer on ourselves and others, and also the further assertions that they entitle us to, as well as those that we are precluded from. Thus

[f]or information (whether true or false) to be communicated is for the claims undertaken by one interlocutor to become available to others (who attribute them) as premises for inferences. Communication is the social production and consumption of reasons.<sup>258</sup>

There are a few issues to note here: firstly Brandom’s answer to his question concerning sapience and rationality is going to be based on social interaction, that is, on a linguistic, or ‘discursive’ relationship that at least two people have. It is in this sphere that the subject of assertion arises, since Brandom thinks that assertion is central to linguistic practice. In fact, he thinks that he can define linguistic practice through his analysis of the act of assertion, such that linguistic practice is any social practice whose structure includes the speech act of asserting,<sup>259</sup> and so, asserting is the very *sine qua non* of language. Of course, the very purpose of our examination of Brandom is to find out what theoretical directions his account of assertion extend in, and accordingly, we will devote section 3.5 to that account. Even before we get to that section though, we will see that this privileging of the social, interpersonal nature of linguistic interaction is just another manifestation of Brandom’s pragmatism, which we will now give a detailed account of.

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256 Ibid., 141.

257 Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 6.

258 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 474.

259 Robert Brandom, “From Truth to Semantics: A Path Through ‘Making It Explicit’,” *Philosophical Issues* 8 (1997): 150.

### 3.3 Phenomenalism and Inferentialism: The Details of Brandom's Pragmatism.

Where Brandom is concerned, pragmatism is explained in terms of two further ubiquitous 'isms' which we must replace with intelligible doctrines if we are to make any sense of his position. Those 'isms' are phenomenalism and inferentialism. Phenomenalism poses a particular problem since it already names a specific epistemological doctrine in mainstream philosophy, one which is only related to Brandom's doctrine by structural analogy. We will therefore explain why Brandom thinks that it is acceptable to describe this separate position as phenomenalism. The second 'ism' characteristic of Brandom's pragmatism is inferentialism, which we will show to be a move that is largely along the same lines. Both, I shall argue, are characterised by a focus on what I will call horizontal relations, that is, relations that are 'at the same level' so to speak. This level is the level of social and linguistic interaction, which is characterised by the act of making assertions, which I discuss in section 3.5.<sup>260</sup>

#### 3.3.1 Background To Phenomenalism

In 'Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk', Brandom offers us a reconstruction of what he describes as 'a certain heroic approach to truth – the approach whose leading idea is that the special linguistic roles of truth ascriptions are to be explained in terms of features of the ascriptions of truth, rather than of what is ascribed'.<sup>261</sup> Brandom clarifies that the

<sup>260</sup> Where relations such as those of inference between assertions by various speakers are described as being horizontal, or 'on the same level', this is supposed to contrast with relations that we may describe as vertical, or on two different levels. A typical example of this is the reference relation, where an utterance, or linguistic item is somehow related to something on a different level, be that an extralinguistic object, or perhaps a fact, or state of affairs. We shall see that it is characteristic of Brandom's pragmatism to reject the later (vertical) in favour of the former (horizontal).

<sup>261</sup> Brandom, "Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk," 75.

focus here on the *act* of calling something true rather than its descriptive content, qualifies such an approach to truth as a *pragmatic* approach, as opposed to a *semantic* one. We have already encountered Brandom's five theses that he attributes to the classical pragmatic idea of truth, in 3.2.2. The result, Brandom tells us, is 'an antirealist position about truth and reference'.<sup>262</sup>

Returning to Brandom's elaboration of the five theses of classical pragmatism, we can see that it is really the first thesis that is the driving force behind the approach that is here called phenomenalism. That first thesis was the performative one, which emphasises the *act* of calling something true rather than any descriptive content that one might associate with what is called true. Brandom writes that,

another way of putting the point is the following: instead of starting with a metaphysical account of truth, such as that of the correspondence theorists, in opposition to which the pragmatists defined themselves, and employing that in one's account of beliefs, which are then conceived as representations that could be true, that is, have the property previously defined, the pragmatists go the other way account. They offer an account of believing or taking-true, characterised by the three sorts of commitments already canvassed, that does not appeal to any notion of truth. Being true is then to be understood as being *properly* taken-true (believed).<sup>263</sup>

But why 'phenomenalism'? Brandom suggests that truth is understood phenomenalistically because it understands a property (truth) in terms of independently characterised '*takings-true*'. Phenomenalism in this sense treats the subject matter as supervening on something else, and Brandom takes the paradigm of this approach to be that of classical sensationalist phenomenalism about physical objects – that is – the Berkeleyan position<sup>264</sup> summed up by the slogan 'To be is to be

262 Ibid.

263 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 191.

264 The link between classical pragmatism and Berkeley's immaterialism is drawn explicitly at the close of James' chapter on *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth* in *Pragmatism*, where he likens Schiller and Dewey's explanations of what people mean by "truth" to Berkeley's explanation of what people mean by "matter". The implication of course was that the contemporary (to James) attacks on the immorality of pragmatism, its hedonism, and its inability to distinguish between wisdom and stupidity were just as misguided as the reception that Berkeley got in his time. William James, *Pragmatism*, Dover Thrift Editions (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), chap. 6.

perceived'.<sup>265</sup> The phenomenalist approach shifts the direction of explanation from what is represented to representings of it. As Brandom puts it:

The general structure exhibited by this sort of account is that the facts about *having* physical properties are taken to supervene on the facts about *seeming* to have such properties. Or in the vocabulary to be preferred here, the facts about what things *are* *Ks*, for a specified sortal *K*, supervene on the facts about what things are *taken* to be *Ks*.<sup>266</sup>

### 3.3.2 Terminological Problems

The term 'phenomenalism', however, seems problematic. Perhaps, though, its use is not quite as misleading as it seems on first viewing. The problem is that phenomenism names a well known philosophical doctrine already, one in the region of epistemology and perception. Briefly put, phenomenism as most philosophers would understand it involves something like the following view: talk about the world of material objects is entirely concerned, or reducible to the objects of our perceptual experience, or sense data. Our belief that a physical object exists is to believe that certain sort of sense data have been experienced, or that under certain conditions such sense data *would be* experienced. Thus as Gibbard has it: 'That a tree is in the quad, thinks the old-time phenomenist, means that *were* I in certain circumstances, I *would* have certain kinds of sense data'.<sup>267</sup> As we have seen, it is this element of supervenience that leads Brandom to describe the pragmatists' view as phenomenist; for just as the existence of the material object supervenes on an experience of sense-data, that is, the phenomena, so to does the property of truth supervene on the act or the phenomenon of taking-true.

<sup>265</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit : Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 292.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> Allan Gibbard, "Review Essays: Thought, Norms, and Discursive Practice: Commentary on Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56, no. 3 (1996): 700.

Gibbard acknowledges that no term for this strategy will be ideal, but takes exception to 'phenomenalism', not just because it already names an only analogously connected doctrine, but because that doctrine (as briefly described above) is associated with subjectivism. Gibbard calls this concern about subjectivism the 'special danger' that the term phenomenalism carries.<sup>268</sup> Gibbard on the other hand thinks that Brandom's strategy should be thought of as a species of expressivism, in the following way. If we imagine parties to a conversation, ourselves, in our daily lives for example, we take each other to mean things by what we say. Expressivism explains this 'taking to mean' as holding that the things we say are *expressions* of our state of mind. In metaethics, for example, emotivists are one type of expressivist, they explain the meaning of moral statements as expressing emotions. Brandom's phenomenalism concerning truth, if Gibbard is right, would mean that for something to be true is for something to be taken-true, where taking-true is an expression of an attitude. Thus phenomenalism is a species of expressivism.<sup>269</sup> What Gibbard actually considers is the attribution of meaning rather than truth: When one party ascribes meaning to another party, they express their state of mind, which is a particular attitude they have towards their interlocutor. Furthermore they ascribe him attitudes. Thus Brandom's model of linguistic interaction is a complex process of keeping score of ones own attitudes and attributing attitudes to others.<sup>270</sup> Statements of meaning are expressions of such attitudes, thus Brandom is an expressivist. The 'special danger' that Gibbard sees is that, the subjectivism that the tag 'phenomenalism' implies would yield an account whereby attributing meaning to X's utterance about P would mean 'under such and such a circumstance, you, or anyone else would also regard P in this way'. Similarly for phenomenalism about truth, the worry is that it implies the following subjectivism: 'under such and such a circumstance you would also take this as true'. This, however, as Gibbard points out, is not Brandom's position. Brandom should therefore have chosen something like 'expressivism' rather

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268 Ibid.

269 Ibid.

270 This is the briefest sketch: the details of Brandom's picture of linguistic interaction are dealt with in 3.5.

than ‘phenomenalism’.

Perhaps not though. As Brandom points out in a footnote, his theory does have similarities to expressivism, writing that,

It is in many ways more natural to think of the approach considered here as “expressivism,” in Allan Gibbard’s sense (see *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990], pp. 7ff. And throughout), rather than as “phenomenalism.” There are differences, however, and in any case the account offered here of expression as making explicit forbids the more familiar rubric.<sup>271</sup>

Brandom’s somewhat cryptic remark that his account of expression as ‘making explicit’ precludes him from calling his view ‘expressivism’ can only briefly be explained here, since it alludes to the social and normative account of assertion that will be dealt with in section 3.5 at the end of this chapter. His problem with expressivism as normally understood (as in Gibbard’s instance of emotivism – or moral expressivism) is that, as Gibbard points out, the idea is that an expression is understood as giving voice to an inner state of mind so to speak, such as an emotion or some attitude. Brandom’s view on the other hand does not treat expression as the voicing of an inner state, but rather making explicit the various commitments and entitlements that we not only hold ourselves to have, but that others hold us to have. Thus expression is less about *internal* states of mind than it is about *external* normative relations of commitment, entitlement, preclusion and so on. Brandom’s account of expression involves making explicit the rules and norms that we as a social group of language users hold each other to, rather than the externalisation of some internal state. The difference then, between classical expressivism and Brandomian expressivism would be along the following lines. For the classical expressivist, the content of an assertion of *P* is taken to be the expression of an attitude the speaker has (such as whether she likes broccoli, or whether she

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<sup>271</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, note 14 p. 682.



disapproves of torture). On Brandom's account however, the content of *P* is given by the attitudes that other speakers take to the original utterer; not whether they like broccoli or disapprove of torture, but rather *deontic* attitudes. The content is given by what other commitments and entitlements the speaker has undertaken by saying *P*.

We will return to this idea that content is determined by certain inferential relations, since this is what is generally meant by *inferentialism* (the topic of 3.3.4). For the moment however, suffice it to say that Brandom thinks that he has good terminological grounds, given his entire project in *Making It Explicit* for calling his view 'phenomenalism' rather than 'expressivism', Gibbard's worries about 'the subjectivist danger' notwithstanding.

### 3.3.3 Characteristics of Brandom's Phenomenalism

So far, we know that phenomenism is supposed to name a doctrine which focusses on the practical significance of the act rather than the property described<sup>272</sup>. We have also learned that the nomenclature involves some misleading and complicated issues surrounding the nexus between phenomenism, expressivism, and subjectivism. With all that in mind we should look more closely at the details of phenomenism. Perhaps the first thing that we can note is an ambiguity in what exactly the doctrine amounts to, pointed out by both Lionel Shapiro, and Gibbard.<sup>273</sup> It appears that the threat of subjectivism is not the only reason that 'phenomenism' may be an undesirable label; Shapiro rejects it because 'Brandom goes on to characterise a number of distinct doctrines as "phenomenalist"', adding that 'Most prominent among these is a supervenience thesis'.<sup>274</sup> Taking his lead from Gibbard's earlier article, Shapiro claims that,

272 Gibbard, "Review Essays," 287–8, 291.

273 Lionel Shapiro, "Brandom on the Normativity of Meaning," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68, no. 1 (2004): 141–60; Gibbard, "Review Essays."

274 Shapiro, "Brandom on the Normativity of Meaning," 142.

Brandom's phenomenalism undergoes a slide from (i) the strategy of explaining what one is doing in taking something to be F, rather than explaining what being F consists in, to (ii) the strategy of explaining that being F consists in being properly taken-F.<sup>275</sup>

Shapiro labels these two approaches as 'attributional pragmatism' and 'constitutional pragmatism'. What he calls 'the supervenience thesis' must refer to the second approach, constitutional pragmatism, that is, the existence of a property 'F' supervenes on or is constituted by some action, namely being taken-F. This is a stronger claim than the first, more strategic claim, which does not necessarily imply any constitutive claim. Take for example the idea of truth: we could take the decision that we should only focus on the act of taking something to be true, without denying that there was an independent property called truth. This would be a sort of pragmatism, but not one that reduced truth to taking-true. Our justification for ignoring the property might be that there is nothing useful we can say about it, perhaps we might hold that we have no epistemic access to it, and for that reason we opt to only discuss that which we do have access to, that is the act of taking-true.

But we have reason to believe that the stronger, constitutive claim is Brandom's primary point. Phenomenalism is a position that describes a general approach, in the style of 'use first' pragmatism which we noted was part of Brandom's overall strategy. However, it is introduced as a theory of truth, and the phenomenalist approach to truth is the paradigm approach. It is summed up by a form of reductionism, which says that 'once one has understood acts of *taking-true* according to this four-part model,<sup>276</sup> one has understood all there is to understand about truth.' This quotation strongly suggests the constitutive point. However, the weaker point creeps in in the subsequent lines:

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid., note 8.

<sup>276</sup> By 'this four-part model', Brandom means theses 1-4 of his 5 theses, above. This quotation serves to sum up the 5<sup>th</sup> thesis, which is really a comment on the other four.

Truth is *treated* [my emphasis], not as a property independent of our attitudes, to which they must eventually answer, but rather as a creature of taking-true and treating-as-true. The central *theoretical* [my emphasis] focus is on what one is *doing* when one takes something to be true...<sup>277</sup>

Here the claim seems diluted. Is the approach just an issue of method? Is it just a matter of which we treat as primary, or what our theoretical focus is? Brandom makes one final move however, claiming that ‘it is then denied that there is more to the phenomenon of truth than the proprieties of such takings’,<sup>278</sup> which brings us back in to ‘constitutive’ territory. In 3.4 we will see more details specifically of Brandom’s theory of truth, and I will argue that it is a species of deflationary theory. As we shall see, this will be defined in terms of there being no such metaphysical property or relation ‘truth’, and so this lends more support to the idea that by phenomenalism Brandom means the constitutive claim. Finally, in an earlier paper, Brandom explicitly contrasts the supervenience relation that is characteristic of phenomenalism with a realist claim that could be made against any instance of a phenomenalist claim:

Corresponding to each specific phenomenalist claim will be a class of claims that qualify as **realist** in the sense of denying the phenomenalist’s “nothing but” account of the subject matter in question. For the classical pragmatist, the facts about what is true supervene on the facts about taking-true, that is, on the actual action-guiding roles of beliefs. [original emphasis]<sup>279</sup>

Phenomenalism is best exemplified by the approach to truth, but it is not limited to it. Rather, it is a general strategy – in Brandom’s words – it ‘is a structure that antirealist accounts of many different subject matters may exhibit.’ Some examples of areas that we might find it are

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<sup>277</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit : Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 287.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> Brandom, “Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk,” 82.

‘physical objects, mental activity, semantic properties, the past, and so on’.<sup>280</sup> One area in particular that I want to read as being another important instance of the phenomenalist approach is Brandom’s approach to meaning and content; it is our second elusive ‘ism’ that characterises Brandom’s pragmatism: it is inferentialism.

### 3.3.4 Inferentialism

Inferentialism is one of the labels that defines Brandom’s general project; in the wake of *Making It Explicit*, Brandom published a shorter, more accessible version of the theory which bears the title *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*. The project in *Making It Explicit* in a general sense is to argue that things like actions (linguistic and otherwise), and other rational and mental phenomena such as intentions, meanings, beliefs and desires ought to be explained by appealing to the system of interconnections between them, rather than by relations such as reference to and representation of things in the world. This, in broad terms, is what is meant by the ‘inferentialist’ project pursued by Brandom.

We will return in more detail (in section 3.5) to Brandom’s ideas about the central place of assertion in linguistic interaction, but at this stage we are only interested in the inferentialist account of meaning and the content of such statements or assertions. The thesis is put fairly baldly in the following way, ‘the idea exploited here, then, is that *assertions* are fundamentally fodder for *inferences*’.<sup>281</sup> For an inferentialist, when one asserts something, the content of that assertion is governed by its inferential roles. What does this mean?

As we saw earlier, part of the background story to Brandom’s system involves playing off

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 164.

the ‘pragmatist schism’ in the tradition, that is, the division between those who see the meaning of an expression as being chiefly a matter of what that expression denotes, or stands for, and those who would rather see it as an issue of how the expression is used. In the Wittgensteinian wing of this tradition, the usage of an expression equates to the language games that we play with it,<sup>282</sup> and for Brandom what is of interest are the rules of such a game, and in particular the rules of inference, rules which govern (in Sellars’ phrase) ‘the giving and asking for reasons’.<sup>283</sup> Brandom’s system is ‘inferentialist’, because he contends that the meaning of an expression is its inferential role. Representationalism and inferentialism are thus juxtaposed by Brandom:

The philosophical tradition can be portrayed as providing two different models for the significances which are proximal objects of explicit understanding, representational and inferential. We may call "representationalism" the semantically reductive view that inference is to be explained away in favour of more primitive representational relations ... By "inferentialism", on the other hand, one would mean the complementary semantically reductive order of explanation which would define representational features of subsentential expressions in terms of the inferential relations of sentences containing them.<sup>284</sup>

It should be clear from even the briefest of introductory remarks that Brandom’s inferentialism employs the same strategy that we are familiar with already, but applies it to the ideas of meaning, and content. It is another instance of adding technical detail to the ‘use first’ pragmatic strategy that we saw Brandom allude to as his inspiration at the start. Phenomenalism, remember, is the doctrine that we focus on the practical significance of an act, such as calling something true, rather than describing a property, such as truth. Inferentialism follows the same route, since it

282 Brandom addresses the various arguments against this sort of ‘regulism’, particularly a regress argument in *Making it Explicit*, ch.1. There is also a particular consideration of Wittgenstein’s use of *regel* as an appendix. Brandom, R. (1994). *Making it explicit : reasoning, representing, and discursive commitment*. Cambridge, Mass. ; London, Harvard University Press.

283 Wilfrid Sellars, Kevin Scharp, and Robert Brandom, *In the Space of Reasons : Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 36.

284 Robert Brandom, “Varieties of Understanding,” in *Reason and Rationality in Natural Science: a Group of Essays*, ed. Nicholas Rescher (University Press of America, 1985), 31.

answers the question of meaning and content by appealing to the practical significance of making a claim or uttering a sentence, rather than appealing to a property, or any sort of semantic object, such as the meaning of the sentence, or its propositional content. Its practical significance as Brandom describes it, is the network of relations of inference that the claim sits nestled in, the commitments that it confers on the claimant, the further inferences it allows, and so on. The details of this network of practical inferential relations will be made clearer when we look more closely at the idea of assertion itself.

### **3.3.5 Historical Inspiration For Inferentialism**

As we have already noted, Brandom often stresses the continuity of his position with thoughts garnered from the grand historical tradition, or as he calls it ‘The Mighty Dead’, and though the philosophers are often major figures, Brandom likes to stress that the elements that he is interested in are often not the well known aspects of this or that particular philosopher. Where phenomenalism is concerned, the relevant portion of the tradition is classical pragmatism. In the case of inferentialism though, he appeals to some figures who we might not normally see as forerunners to pragmatism.

Let’s take as an illustration the following quotation from Frege, which Brandom cites approvingly as precedent to the inferentialist view.

There are two ways in which the content of two judgements may differ; it may, or it may not, be the case that all inferences that can be drawn from the first judgement when combined with certain other ones can always also be drawn from the second when combined with the same other judgements. The two propositions ‘the Greeks defeated the Persians at Plataea’ and ‘the Persians were defeated by the Greeks at Plataea’ differ in the former

way; even if a slight difference of sense is discernible, the agreement in sense is preponderant. Now I call that part of the content that is the same in both the conceptual content. Only this has significance for our symbolic language [Begriffsschrift] ... In my formalized language [BGS] ... only that part of judgements which affects the possible inferences is taken into consideration. Whatever is needed for a correct [richtig, usually misleadingly translated as "valid"] inference is fully expressed; what is not needed is ... not.<sup>285</sup>

Brandom makes much of the fact that the early Frege seems to have taken a sort of functionalist approach to questions of content like this. He reads this as inferentialist for the following reason- The qualification 'conceptual', Brandom tells us, is explicitly construed by Frege in inferential terms, the above citation argues that conceptual content can be shared by more than one claim if and only if those claims have the same inferential role. So according to Brandom, Frege's fundamental semantic principle is that a good inference never leads from a true claim to one that is not true. The standard interpretation of this is to assume a prior grip on the notion of truth, but inferential pragmatism reverses this, as with the other standard traditional interpretations, starting with a practical distinction between good and bad inferences, understood as a distinction between appropriate and inappropriate doings. Truth is what is preserved by the good moves.

Perhaps less surprisingly, Brandom marshals Wittgenstein, who plays an important role which is thrown in to even starker relief by the fact that he moves from a paradigmatically representationalist viewpoint to perhaps the most celebrated version of the 'meaning is use' thesis. At one stage in his movement between these two he makes a claim that captures the inferentialist standpoint:

The rules of logical inference cannot be either wrong or right. They determine the meaning of the signs ... We

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285 Frege, *Begriffsschrift*, sect. 3, cited in Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, 58.

can conceive the rules of inference - I want to say - as giving the signs their meaning, because they are rules for the use of these signs.<sup>286</sup>

This same thought regarding inferential content gets expressed later by Carnap, in ‘The Logical Syntax of Language’ where content is defined as the class of nonvalid sentences which are its consequences; nonvalid here means non logically-true sentences, since these are consequences of any sentence.<sup>287</sup> We are hardly surprised that Wittgenstein and Carnap are forerunners. One philosopher who may surprise us however, is Kant. Kant plays a pivotal role in Brandom’s narrative as the one who makes ‘the semantic turn’, that is the turn that privileges semantics over epistemology. A new way of thinking about conceptual content comes to the fore in Kant, and for Brandom, it displays certain hallmarks of inferentialism; in other words, he attributes to Kant the realisation that understanding a concept necessarily involves understanding its ‘lawlike relations’ to other concepts:

One cannot count as understanding the concept of mass if one does not understand its lawlike relation to the concepts of force and acceleration. I think this view should be understood as a development of the *inferentialism* Kant inherited from his rationalist predecessors. He takes it that the contentfulness of concepts *essentially* involves *rational relations* with other concepts, according to which the applicability of one provides *reasons* for or against the applicability of others. Applying one concept can *oblige* one to apply another, *preclude* one from applying a different one, and *permit* one to apply still others. Concept use, then, involves a *normative* dimension. Kant understands concepts as the rules that ultimately determine the correctness of such inferential moves.<sup>288</sup>

### 3.3.6 Conclusion

<sup>286</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, para. 24, 398.

<sup>287</sup> Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1937).

<sup>288</sup> Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, 6.



In summation, the doctrine that Brandom names as ‘phenomenalism’, while inspired by the traditional pragmatic treatment of truth, is really a general strategy, since it is repeated in several areas, most notably in the approach to meaning that Brandom calls ‘inferentialism’. It ought to be understood as an elaboration upon the ‘meaning is use’ slogan, and hence, as the fulfilment of Brandom’s promise to build theory on a rather enigmatic Wittgensteinian mantra. The broad strategy that both phenomenalism about truth, and inferentialism about meaning exemplify constitute the essence of Brandom’s pragmatism. Therefore, now that we are familiar with the difficulties and nuances surrounding Brandom’s use of ‘phenomenalism’, I propose ‘rebranding’ it simply as ‘Brandomian Pragmatism’, or simply *BP*.

As I alluded to earlier, one of the striking aspects of *BP* is that it generally disposes of what we might term ‘vertical’ relations, such as truth and reference, in terms of what we might call ‘horizontal’ relations such as assertion and inference. The reason that we might call these ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ is that they can be described as connecting things on different ‘levels’ (vertical), or things on the same level (horizontal). Let us take as an example the reference relation, which Brandom rejects.<sup>289</sup> Traditionally that is a ‘word-world’ relation, and so it relates two separate levels; it is a vertical relation. But Brandom replaces it with the notion of inference, which is a word-word relation: that is, the only things that inferences connect to are other inferences. Similarly by replacing the notion of truth, traditionally thought of as (in some manner) a connection between what we say (words) and the world, Brandom focusses on the horizontal rather than the vertical. The vertical word-world relation: truth, is replaced by the activity of assertion, whose only connections are horizontal ones, to other assertions, as we shall see in 3.5. Indeed, it is this focus on horizontal relations exclusively that leads certain critics to charge Brandom with ‘losing the world’. Simon Blackburn, for example, writes that Brandom only seems to deal with ‘...concepts without responsiveness to anything other than themselves, in a self-contained dance of inferences...It is as

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<sup>289</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit : Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, chap. 5.

though a thought only maintains friendly relations with other thoughts...'.<sup>290</sup> Whether or not this criticism is decisive is not our concern here however. This issue concerning the almost exclusive focus on horizontal relations will turn out to be quite important in our final chapter, when we ask whether MacFarlane's appropriation of elements from *BP* is really compatible with his account of relative truth.

### 3.4 Truth

This section explains why Brandom's system should be thought of as a type of deflation of the truth relation. We show how Brandom's thought about truth takes its inspiration from the work of the Classical Pragmatists, most notably William James. Importantly though, Brandom highlights a problem that the Pragmatists faced when they tried to present a deflated account of truth. The theory cannot handle embedded, unasserted uses of 'true', or when 'true' is used as an unasserted antecedent in a conditional. This problem is essentially the same problem that Peter Geach posed to expressivism, as the well known 'Frege-Geach' problem (see 3.4.2, below). In light of this problem, Brandom makes an important amendment to the traditional Pragmatist deflation of the concept of truth, which leads him to assert a distinction between metaphysical redundancy and expressive redundancy, where truth is concerned. He subscribes to the former, but importantly, he rejects the latter, since truth can function as an important expressive device, which he calls a 'pro-sentence forming operator' (explained at 3.4.2.1, below).<sup>291</sup>

#### 3.4.1 Deflationary Truth

Brandomian Pragmatism (*BP*) is defined by a prioritisation of practical activity, such as taking something as true, over the relation or property of truth, or similarly the prioritisation of

<sup>290</sup> Simon Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising: And Other Philosophical Essays* (OUP Oxford, 2010), 265.

<sup>291</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 303–5.

the activity of recognising and attributing inferential commitment, over a metaphysical object called propositional content. When it comes specifically to truth, this means that Brandom's conclusion is that what we talk about as 'truth' is actually not a property, or perhaps not a real relation. Rather, when we talk about 'the truth', we are really talking about an abstraction which supervenes on the activities of treating something as true. I want to describe this view as a deflationary one, and in this section we'll explore what sort of view that is, and what deflation means here.

There are many philosophical discussions concerning truth, and what is more, many of these debates centre on what sort of things a philosophical conversation about truth should even address in the first place. Wolfgang Kühne gives a useful overview of them<sup>292</sup> (but they cannot all be our concern here). Rather I wish to focus on one, which I believe cuts to the heart of the main issue wherever a theory of truth is described as deflationary. However, we shall make use of Kühne's schematic of possible questions, since it provides us with a well structured survey of the conceptual terrain in which we might want to locate Brandom, and indeed MacFarlane. Kühne's book is organised around a set of conceptual questions about truth that he organises as a flow chart, for the purposes of mapping out which answers lead to which positions. To illustrate, take as an example the question 'is truth a property of propositions?' If the answer is yes, there is a further question as to whether it is a *stable* property of propositions; a negative answer to this second question describes the view known as *temporalism*, while a positive answer describes the view known as *eternalism*.<sup>293</sup> But the questions that Kühne uses to locate various views on truth, such as 'is truth a property of sentences?', and 'can the concept of sentential truth be explained?' and even 'is truth a relational property?' are all subsequent to his very first question, which is the question that we are interested in answering here. That question is simply, 'is truth a property?'<sup>294</sup> Answering 'yes' sets us down the path of asking whether it is a relational property, and if so, what the implied relation is

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292 Kühne, *Conceptions of Truth*.

293 *Ibid.*, 15.

294 *Ibid.*, 3.

to. A negative answer is labelled by Künne simply as ‘nihilism’, and we can see why: Künne's first question is really a meta-theoretical question (in that it is a question that asks about the possibility of a theory of truth at all). If it is denied that truth is a property, then we can't really have any debate about what sort of property it is. It is a question that requires a positive answer in order to proceed to any philosophical discussion. Scott Soames in *Understanding Truth* also defines nihilism as a brand of scepticism about truth: ‘This is the view that there is no such property as truth and that truth predicates lack descriptive content’.<sup>295</sup>

I want to understand the term ‘deflation’, as applied to the concept of truth, in the way that Künne and Soames understand ‘nihilism’. The reason that Künne calls the position ‘nihilism’ rather than ‘deflationism’ is that he thinks deflationism is applied to too many different positions, and, while this might be a problem for someone who is attempting such an ambitious and wide ranging assessment of the entire field of theories of truth as Künne is, it is not as serious a problem for us.<sup>296</sup> The definition of deflation that I propose we follow is described separately by Crispin Wright, Paul Boghossian, as well as William Alston, and it says that for a view to count as deflationary, that view should hold that it is a mistake to suppose that truth is a property one attributes to propositions, statements, beliefs and so on.<sup>297</sup>

Echoing Brandom's comment that classical pragmatism yields an ‘antirealist position about truth’,<sup>298</sup> Boghossian classifies deflationism as a species of ‘irrealism’, where ‘[an] irrealist conception of a given region of discourse is the view that no real properties answer to the central predicates of the region in question’.<sup>299</sup> Irrealism concerning truth in particular is traced to A.J. Ayer who wrote in *Language, Truth and Logic* that,

<sup>295</sup> Scott Soames, *Understanding Truth* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1998), 4.

<sup>296</sup> Künne proposes banishing ‘deflationism’ to the *Index Verborum Prohibitorum* (after Neurath) on account of its ‘terminological chaos’ Künne, *Conceptions of Truth*, 20.

<sup>297</sup> William P Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 41; Paul Boghossian, “The Status of Content,” *Philosophical Review* 99, no. 2 (1990): 161; Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, 16.

<sup>298</sup> Brandom, “Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk,” 75.

<sup>299</sup> Boghossian, “The Status of Content,” 157.

there is no problem of truth as it is ordinarily conceived. The traditional conception of truth as a 'real quality' or a 'real relation' is due, like most philosophical mistakes, to a failure to analyze sentences correctly. There are sentences ... in which the word 'truth' seems to stand for something real ... [but] our analysis has shown that the word 'truth' does not stand for anything.<sup>300</sup>

This concept of truth, Boghossian tells us, has come to be known as the 'deflationary' or 'disappearance' view, and 'is characterised by the claim that there is no such thing as the property of truth, a property that sentences or thoughts may enjoy, and that would be named by the words "true" or "truth"'.<sup>301</sup> Künne places Brandom firmly within this tradition, which he traces back further than Ayer, to Frank Ramsey's redundancy theory, which we will look at in the next section.

Frank Ramsey's so-called Redundancy Theory and its refinement in the work of Arthur Prior have been a fertile source of inspiration for nihilism in the last three decades. Detailed expositions of nihilism were given by Christopher Williams and by Dorothy Grover, and the most recent version is Robert Brandom's.<sup>302</sup>

So much for the negative point, that truth is not a property. Tracing nihilism back to figures such as Ramsey and Ayer we are led towards the redundancy theory: due to the fact that truth is a bogus predicate or property its use is redundant. At this point we need to make a crucial distinction. Brandom's deflationary account of truth holds that truth is not a property. It is *metaphysically* redundant, but not redundant *tout court*. In the next section we will address Brandom's positive account of truth. Despite the nihilism, truth retains an important *expressive* role.

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300 A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (Dover Publications Inc., 2002), 87.

301 Boghossian, "The Status of Content," 161.

302 Künne, *Conceptions of Truth*, 4.

### 3.4.2 From Pragmatism to Prosententialism

We can best introduce this positive expressive role for truth by returning to Brandom's reaction to classical pragmatism's theory of truth. To recap, Brandom concurs with its main insights; he introduces his discussion of truth in *Making it Explicit* (ch. 5) by acknowledging the 'phenomenalist' insight that the classical pragmatists brought to the discussion of truth, that is, the recognition that there is a performative aspect to treating something as true. He goes on to say that

to this performative, antidescriptive explanatory commitment, the pragmatists add a particular sort of account of the act of taking-true as adopting a *normative stance* toward the claim or belief. In treating something as true, one is praising it in a special way – endorsing it or committing oneself to it.<sup>303</sup>

There are two main points that Brandom takes as his own, from classical pragmatism. The first is the priority of activity over property that we saw characterise *BP*. The second involves the idea of making a normative commitment that we will explore in our section 3.5, on assertion. But classical pragmatism has serious failings; while it is clear that Brandom is heavily influenced by it, he cannot accept it as it is, for the following reason. If, as the classical pragmatists say, truth is defined as the activity taking-true, and taking-true is defined by whatever practical significance is attached to our asserting something, then a point that was made by Frege arises.<sup>304</sup> Not all uses of 'is true' have assertoric force. We may, for example, embed one sentence in another sentence, and the embedded sentence may contain '...is true'. But as Brandom points out, 'assertion of a sentence containing another sentence as a component is not in general assertion of the embedded sentence'.<sup>305</sup>

<sup>303</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 289.

<sup>304</sup> The point is the celebrated distinction between 'force' and 'content': '[a]n interrogative sentence and an indicative one contain the same thought; but the indicative contains something else as well, namely, the assertion. The interrogative sentence contains something more too, namely a request. Therefore two things must be distinguished in an indicative sentence: the content, which it has in common with the corresponding sentence-question, and the assertion. The former is the thought, or at least contains the thought. So it is possible to express the thought without laying it down as true'. Frege, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry," 294.

<sup>305</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 298.

Similarly, such a theory could not make sense of ‘...is true’ when it forms the antecedent of a conditional: ‘if it is true that  $p$ , then it is true that  $q$ ’. As Brandom points out, this is exactly analogous to the so called ‘Frege-Geach’ problem that Peter Geach raised against performative, or expressivist accounts of ‘good’; once the term appears in an unasserted context, the account fails. Geach makes the point against such a position generally, which encompasses use of both ‘true’ and ‘good’, which he here calls ‘ascriptivism’:

There is a radical flaw in this whole pattern of philosophizing. What is being attempted in each case is to account for the use of a term “P” concerning a thing as being a performance of some other nature than describing the thing. But what is regularly ignored is the distinction between calling a thing “P” and predicating “P” of a thing. A term “P” may be predicated of a thing in an *if* or *then* clause, or in a clause of a disjunctive proposition, without the thing's being thereby called “P.” To say, “If the policeman's statement is true, the motorist touched 60 mph” is not to *call* the policeman's statement true; to say, “If gambling is bad, inviting people to gamble is bad” is to call either gambling or invitations to gamble “bad.” Now the theories of nondescriptive performances regularly take into account only the use of a term “P” to *call* something “P”; the corroboration theory of truth, for example, considers only the use of “true” to *call* a statement true, and the condemnation theory of the term “bad” considers only the way it is used to *call* something bad; predications of “true” and “bad” in *if* or *then* clauses, or in clauses of disjunction, are just ignored. One could not write off such uses of the terms, as calling for a different explanation from their use to *call* things true or bad; for that would mean that arguments of the pattern “if  $x$  is true (if  $w$  is bad), then  $p$ ; but  $x$  is true ( $w$  is bad); *ergo*  $p$ ” contained a fallacy of equivocation, whereas they are in fact clearly valid.<sup>306</sup>

If *BP* is a form of expressivism as we discussed above, it must surely encounter this sort of problem, the problem of *embedding*. This failing does not lead Brandom to jettison the phenomenalist approach altogether though, since all it needs is to be supplemented by a better account of embedded use. He writes that,

<sup>306</sup>P.T. Geach, “Ascriptivism,” *The Philosophical Review* 69, no. 2 (1960): 223.

[a]nalyzing and identifying uses of truth locutions by means of *redundancy of force* (that is, by a formal property of the pragmatic significance of acts of asserting freestanding truth claims) is not a sufficient explanatory strategy. It is not that freestanding force redundancy is not a central phenomenon of truth talk. But not all uses of truth locutions take this form. More is required for an account of the use of 'true' than can be provided simply by an account of taking-true as asserting or undertaking an assertional commitment. The pragmatic account cannot for this reason be the whole truth.<sup>307</sup>

### 3.4.2.1 The Prosentential Theory

Brandom is left in need of a solution to the various embedding problems that the pragmatist faces due to his general phenomenalist/expressivist strategy of explaining truth talk. Yet whatever solution he finds must also cohere with his general deflationary account, that truth is not a genuine property. The account that he recommends to us is the 'prosentential theory of truth', a brand of deflationism. Grover et. al. fall in line with our preferred rendering of the deflationary account since they state quite clearly that '[t]ruth, to coin a phrase, isn't a genuine predicate'.<sup>308</sup> For the purposes of understanding Brandom, we may trace this particular style of truth-scepticism back to Ramsey, who in 1927 argued that we could do without 'truth', in other words, the idea that truth is a property is merely a grammatical illusion, caused by the misleading 'X is F' formula. When we analyse it in fact, truth as a property is redundant. Ramsey writes:

But before we proceed further with the analysis of judgement, it is necessary to say something about truth and falsehood, in order to show that there is really no separate problem of truth but merely a linguistic muddle. Truth

<sup>307</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 299.

<sup>308</sup> Grover, Camp, and Belnap, "A Prosentential Theory of Truth," 94.



and falsity are ascribed primarily to propositions. The proposition to which they are ascribed may be either explicitly given or described. Suppose first that it is explicitly given; then it is evident that “it is true that Caesar was murdered” means no more than that Caesar was murdered, and “it is false that Caesar was murdered” means that Caesar was not murdered. They are phrases which we sometimes use for emphasis or for stylistic reasons, or to indicate the position occupied by the statement in our argument. So also we can say “it is a fact that he was murdered” or “that he was murdered is contrary to fact.”<sup>309</sup>

Brandom adopts an approach to truth that is the ‘grandchild’ of Ramsey’s redundancy theory. In between Ramsey and Brandom stands the *Prosentential Theory of Truth*, published by Grover, Camp and Belnap in 1975, which took itself to be filling in the technical detail of something that Ramsey had not fully worked out, but only briefly suggested. They write,

[w]e are about to present a semantical analysis of truth talk which we label the ‘redundancy theory’ and which might well be one Ramsey 1927 had in mind. We say ‘might well’ because Ramsey’s explanation of his theory is so condensed it is hard to see exactly what he does have in mind. Anyhow, our explication of Ramsey’s theory goes like this: if we allow ourselves to enrich English in a rather modest way – by the addition of machinery for propositional quantification – we can say *without* the help of a truth predicate anything we can say *with* it.<sup>310</sup>

The way to explain the use of ‘true’ in natural English, is to understand it as what they call a ‘prosentence’. Just as a pronoun like ‘it’ can stand for a preceding noun, Grover Camp and Belnap argue that “that is true” or “it is true” should be understood as pro-sentences, standing in for a preceding sentence, thus their theory is the prosentential theory of truth. ‘That is true’ is just a species of the genus *proform*, which includes the pronoun, such as ‘it’, the *proverb*, which stands in for a preceding verb, for example ‘did’ in

309 F.P Ramsey, “Facts and Propositions,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes 7* (1927): 157.

310 Grover, Camp, and Belnap, “A Prosentential Theory of Truth,” 74.

‘Mary ran quickly, so Bill *did* too.’

The *proadjective* ‘such’ in

‘the pointless lances of the preceding day were certainly no longer *such*.’ (Scott)

And even the *proadverb* ‘so’

‘She twitched violently, and while so twitching, expired.’

As we can see, it has all of the lack of theoretical commitment that Ramsey could wish for, but it explains in more detail why, despite its redundancy, ‘true’ is such a useful term. If I substitute ‘it’ for a noun, we need ascribe no special property to that thing, that allows the substitution, however, it is a very useful thing to be able to do. The prosentential theory is one that is committed to the redundancy of ‘truth’ as a metaphysical (or otherwise) property, and as such it may be classed as deflationary, or nihilistic, that is, it seeks to explain why something which appears to be a lofty and deep concept is not particularly interesting after all.

Brandom’s take on truth is a variation on this, and he calls it the *anaphoric* account.<sup>311</sup> An anaphor is a word whose referent is determined by a preceding word, such as a pronoun. He writes that,

[t]he most sophisticated and successful account I know of the expressive role of the concept of truth—of what one is *doing* in deploying truth talk—is an *anaphoric* theory. Such theories originate with Grover, Camp, and

<sup>311</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, chap. 5.3.

Belnap's *prosentential theory of truth*. The version I favor understands locutions such as "...is true" and its relatives as *proform-forming operators*. In the simplest case, "That is true," is a *prosentence*, which relates to, and inherits its content from, an anaphoric antecedent—for instance someone else's tokening of "Snow is white,"—in the same way that a *pronoun* such as 'he' relates to and inherits its content from an anaphoric antecedent—for instance, someone else's tokening of "Tarski".<sup>312</sup>

Truth talk is not straightforwardly redundant, urges Brandom, because used as a *prosentence*, or as Brandom puts it 'a *prosentence-forming operator*',<sup>313</sup> it allows us expressive power we would not otherwise have. Consider the difference between the following two anaphoric uses of 'it is true':

Hegel said "Truth is a vast Bacchanalian revel, with not a soul sober," and I believe it is true.

This is what is called 'lazy' anaphora, since 'it is true' can be substituted directly by the sentence that precedes it, without changing the meaning. However,

One of Hegel's notorious remarks about truth is hard to understand, but I believe it is true.

Is not equivalent to

One of Hegel's notorious remarks about truth is hard to understand, but I believe one of Hegel's notorious remarks about truth.

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312 Ibid., 301.

313 Ibid., 303.

Thus ‘it is true’ in the non-lazy anaphoric use gives us a certain expressive power that we would not otherwise have.<sup>314</sup> A second expressive power is pointed out by Brandom; the example of arriving late to a conversation. This one has more to do with the core ideas of inferentialism directly, that is, the role of inference in communication. Here we have an example of the expressive power of anaphoric truth, but it could just as easily be an example of how semantic content can be understood in terms of inferential relations between speakers rather than vertical reference relations.

Brandom asks us to imagine a latecomer in a conversation:

Suppose B comes late into a conversation A is having:

A: ...This comment by the policeman<sub>1</sub> makes him<sub>2</sub> very angry. So then the guy<sub>2</sub> jumps out of his<sub>2</sub> car, and takes a swing at the cop<sub>1</sub>!

B might then jump into the conversation, saying something like

B: I’ll bet that the cop<sub>1</sub> saw to it that that idiot<sub>2</sub> spent the night in jail. No police officer could let his<sub>2</sub> behavior go unpunished.

Here B, in a literal sense, does not know who he is talking about. Having missed the beginning of the conversation, which introduced the characters, he doesn’t know whether A is talking about something he witnessed, something that was described to him, or recounting a piece of fiction he read. He has no idea who the impulsive motorist is. Yet by anaphorically picking up the chains A has displayed, B settles it that he is talking (and thinking) about whoever it is that A was talking (and thinking) about. If A’s claims have truth conditions and inferential consequences, then so do B’s.<sup>315</sup>

Thus Brandom, in the spirit of Ramsey denies any metaphysical or deep import to truth as a

314 Robert Brandom, “Explanatory Vs. Expressive Deflationism About Truth,” in *What Is Truth?*, ed. Richard Schantz (Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 105.

315 *Ibid.*, 111–2.

property, truth is thus redundant as far as explanation goes, so the concept should be deflated. However truth as an expressive linguistic tool is not redundant. He therefore states:

I want to recommend a particular form of deflationary theory of the use of the word ‘true’ and its cognates, which I have developed in more detail elsewhere: the anaphoric approach ... I argue that, so understood, ‘true’ plays a crucial expressive role. Adding such a locution to a language substantially increases its overall expressive resources and capabilities. Thus one should not take a deflationary attitude toward the *expressive* role of ‘true’.<sup>316</sup>

Whatever ‘deflationism’ and ‘nihilism’ may mean elsewhere, in the mouths of other philosophers, we can at least be clear on the way that they describe Brandom’s position. Deflationism says that the truth predicate is a redundant operator. However there is an important distinction to be made between truth as an *explanatory* term, and as an *expressive* term. In keeping with the deflationary picture, that truth is not a genuine property, it is thus redundant, as far as being an explanatory term goes. There is no such property or relation. However truth is also an important expressive term, as the prosentential/anaphoric account shows us. Therefore *explanatory* deflation should not lead us to conclude *expressive* redundancy: ‘the function of traditional semantic vocabulary is expressive, not explanatory’.<sup>317</sup>

But Brandom does not stop there, rather, he argues that the distinction between expressive and explanatory is one of preclusion. In other words, the recognition of the expressive nature of truth claims obviates their role as explanations;

it is denied that the notion of *truth conditions* can be appealed to in explaining (as opposed to expressing) the sort of *propositional contents* expressed by declarative sentences – and similarly the notion of *association with a referent* can be appealed to in explaining the sort of semantic contribution the occurrence of a singular term

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316 Ibid., 103.

317 Brandom, *Making It Explicit : Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 322.

makes to the contents of sentences in which it appears.<sup>318</sup>

Brandom elaborates further:

Once the expressive role of 'true' and 'fact' is properly understood, it becomes apparent that their use presupposes a notion of propositional content (hence of propositionally contentful acts and states); so what such traditional semantic vocabulary expresses is not in principle available to explain the nature of propositional contentfulness. Their parasitic role precludes their playing a fundamental semantic explanatory role.<sup>319</sup>

Just as we can compare the structure of Pragmatism's deflation of truth to Berkeley's metaphysical deflation of Material substance, Brandom finds identity of structure between his claim about expressive power precluding explanatory power regarding semantics, and the same claim made by Sellars regarding the nature of claims involving the 'seems' and 'looks' locutions. In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars famously takes issue with the Cartesian project: he argued that once the expressive nature of 'seems' and 'looks' is understood, it can't be used to underpin epistemology, as Descartes used it. The key to Descartes reliance on 'seemings' rather than propositions is their incorrigibility. One can be in error that the book lies on the table, but not that it seems as though the book lies on the table.<sup>320</sup>

But Sellars argues that the incorrigibility of 'seems' talk only reflects the fact that an assertion modified by 'seems' withholds the usual endorsements of judgements based around 'is'. It is trivially true that if there is no endorsement, there can be no mistake. Thus, argues Sellars, the incorrigibility of 'seems' talk is trivial, and thus unsuited to the role of epistemic foundation. Because 'seems' talk is really a modified judgement, you must be able to use inferentially articulated

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318 Ibid., 326.

319 Ibid., 330.

320 Wilfrid Sellars, Richard Rorty, and Robert Brandom, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

concepts already in order to even make sense of them. Thus, 'seems' judgements are not immediate cognitions. 'Seems' talk should be understood as expressing a judgement but at the same time withholding an endorsement. It cannot therefore be used to explain epistemic notions like judgements, concepts, and inference.

The parallel that Brandom wishes to draw is that, if we accept that the primary function of talk about 'truth', 'fact' and 'representation' is expressive, and thus, in the pragmatist tradition, it is the act of 'taking true' which underpins any talk of truth as a relation, then we can't go on to use the notion of truth to explain things like propositional content. For we must have already grasped a notion of propositional content in order to take something as true, just as for Sellars we must have already grasped something about judgement in order to use the 'seems' locution. In both cases, the primacy of its use as an expressive tool cuts away any possibility of its use as an explanatory tool.

### 3.4.3 Summary

The main points we can take from Brandom's treatment of the truth issue is that he is broadly in line with pragmatic phenomenalism (and hence with *BP*), which Brandom describes as a 'heroic approach to truth – the approach whose leading idea is that the special linguistic roles of truth ascriptions are to be explained in terms of features of the ascribings of truth, rather than of what is ascribed'.<sup>321</sup> However there were problems, such a theory as articulated by the classical pragmatists could not handle embedded content among other things, so Grover's et. al. prosentential Theory of truth was used to, in effect, plug the holes of the pragmatist conception, without departing too far from its spirit. This leads Brandom to espouse an explanatory but not an expressive deflationism, an interesting consequence of which was that truth's expressive role meant that its explanatory role no longer was tenable.

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<sup>321</sup>Brandom, "Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk," 75.

Thus as Brandom describes his view,

Being true is then understood as being *properly* taken-true (believed). It is this idea that is built on [in *Making It Explicit*], jettisoning the details of the classical pragmatist account of belief or taking-true, and substituting for it the account of assertion and doxastic commitment introduced in chapter 3.<sup>322</sup>

This leads us to the next section which asks, what does 'taking-true' consist in? As we shall see, the answer will involve the ideas of asserting, and a game analogy that Brandom calls 'scorekeeping'. When we tease these issues out we will be able to make sense of those norms of assertion that brought us to Brandom in the first place.

## 3.5 Assertion

### 3.5.1 Assertions are Fundamental

Let us remind ourselves how we have come to the topic of assertion, when we started with questions concerning pragmatism and truth. It was noted above that all of the facets of *BP* have a shared 'horizontal' character, and that this is really only another way of saying that they focus on use and practical consequence rather than real, or metaphysical properties. If we are to focus on making inferences, rather than theorising about reference, and also taking-true, rather than talking about a property 'truth', both of these activities can be described in terms of claiming, denying, justifying, in short, making assertions of various kinds. So the focus on asserting is really only the fulfilment of the exhortation that Brandom takes from Pierce and the pragmatists to focus on the practical activity rather than the properties and theoretical entities. Indeed, Asserting is at the very

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<sup>322</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit : Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 291.



foundation of the answer to Brandom's general motivation, which as we saw earlier, was to explain what it is that makes us distinctively Human, what explains rationality and sapience. Brandom reduces these, as well as communication in general to 'the social production and consumption of reasons'.<sup>323</sup> To be rational is to make assertions. Hence, assertion makes us what we are.

Brandom thinks that linguistic practice is any social practice whose structure includes the speech act of asserting,<sup>324</sup> and so, asserting is the very *sine qua non* of language:

No sort of speech act is as important for philosophers to understand as assertion. Assertion of declarative sentences is the form of cognitive discourse, and is the fundamental activity in which linguistic meaningfulness is manifested.<sup>325</sup>

### 3.5.2 What is Assertion?

The idea of assertion is central in the game of giving and asking for reasons, since 'assertings (performances that are overt undertakings of assertional commitments) are in the fundamental case what reasons are asked for, and what giving a reason always consists in'.<sup>326</sup> Assertional commitments hence play a dual role, of justifier, and that which justification is demanded of. An assertion can be a claim that something is thus and so. If my claim is challenged, that is, if justification is demanded of it, what is being asked of me is that I provide further assertions to act as justification. We will see more detail of this structure of challenge and justification in 3.5.3, below.

In yet another instance of *BP*, Brandom reverses the traditional view of what constitutes the

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323 Ibid., 474.

324 Brandom, "From Truth to Semantics: A Path Through 'Making It Explicit'," 150.

325 Robert Brandom, "Asserting," *Noûs* 17, no. 4 (1983): 637.

326 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 167.

content of an assertion: an assertion is the expression of a belief. The traditional view of the relationship between belief and assertion is that an assertion expresses, or gives voice to a belief, and so, its content is just the same as the content of the belief it expresses. If two things are linked in this way, one might expect to be able to explain one in terms of the other, i.e. an expression or an assertion in terms of a belief, or some such mental attitude. Brandom opts to reverse this order of explanation however, claiming that assertions have explanatory priority over beliefs. Why does he do this? If one is to explain the other, it is natural that beliefs should explain assertions, since there are beliefs that do not have a corresponding assertion, but no assertions that lack a corresponding belief. It may be objected here that there are of course unbelieved assertions, but the sense of 'belief' here is meant to pick out a mental object, rather than saying something about the sincerity of your assertion. So an 'every assertion is also a belief' only says that there are no 'external', expressed assertions that do not have an 'internal' belief counterpart, not that all assertions are sincere (believed). On the other hand, there are obviously unasserted beliefs, that is, mental objects, thoughts, that are never made public. So this asymmetry naturally gives rise to the traditional position, that assertions are founded on beliefs or thoughts. But Dummett has offered an alternative to this; 'we have opposed throughout the view of assertion as the expression of an interior act of judgement; judgement, rather, is the interiorisation of the external act of assertion'.<sup>327</sup> Brandom warns us not to mistake this for the claim that speech acts can be made sense of without mentioning anything other than other speech acts. For his own part he suggests that Dummett's formulation would be consonant with 'an account of asserting that incorporates an account of the particular sort of *commitment* (a deontic status) one undertakes in making an assertion'. The only thing that is excluded rather, is an explanation of assertion as the expression of an intentional state or deontic status that is intelligible apart from the possibility of expressing it by asserting something.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London, Cambridge MA: Duckworth, Harvard University Press, 1981), 362.

<sup>328</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 153–4.

Brandom sums up the claim in the following way:

Speech acts having the pragmatic significance of assertions play an essential role in (social) functional systems within which states or statuses can be understood as propositionally contentful in the way beliefs are.<sup>329</sup>

The content of assertions, what they mean, is determined by their inferential role, as we saw earlier in the section on inferentialism. This is why Brandom claims that ‘the idea exploited here, then, is that *assertions* are fundamentally fodder for *inferences*’.<sup>330</sup> Thus, as we saw in 3.3.5, Brandom approves of Frege’s idea that if two assertions play indistinguishable inferential roles, then they have the same content.

### 3.5.3 Scorekeeping and the Norms of Assertion

Brandom believes that rationality and sapience, and whatever it is that makes us who we are as ‘concept mongers’<sup>331</sup> is necessarily communal, it is ‘discursive’. The activity of asserting is inextricably bound to such a discursive linguistic community, and it always involves a certain normative structure:

The speech act of asserting arises in a particular, socially instituted, autonomous structure of responsibility and authority. In asserting a sentence one both commits oneself to it and endorses it.<sup>332</sup>

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329 Ibid., 154.

330 Ibid., 168.

331 Brandom equates these ideas: “So sapience, discursive intentionality, is concept-mongering” Ibid., 8.

332 Brandom, “Asserting,” 640.

Brandom wants to say that *what we do* when we assert, and commit ourselves, and endorse the assertions of others, is a form of scorekeeping. We simultaneously keep track of our own commitments, and those of others: ‘Each interlocutor keeps score for himself and for others, in the form of attributed commitments’.<sup>333</sup>

### 3.5.3.1 Scorekeeping

The metaphor of scorekeeping comes from David Lewis’ paper ‘Scorekeeping in a Language Game’.<sup>334</sup> Lewis pointed out that we could imagine the rule-governedness of a conversation by comparing it to the rule-governedness of a baseball game, particularly since the score in such a game has several parameters, for instance, the runs that the home team has, those of the visitors, what half it is, what innings it is, how many strikes there have been, how many balls, and how many outs. The details are irrelevant, the point is that what counts as correct or incorrect play depends on the score, as it does in many games. Lewis claims, for example, that ‘correctness depends on the score: what is correct play after two strikes differs from what is correct play after three’.<sup>335</sup> The general idea behind the comparison between a conversation and a game like baseball then, is that,

Like the components of a baseball score, the components of a conversational score at a given stage are abstract entities. They may not be numbers, but they are other set-theoretic constructs: sets of presupposed propositions, boundaries between permissible and impermissible courses of action, or the like.<sup>336</sup>

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 646.

<sup>334</sup> David Lewis, “Scorekeeping in a Language Game,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, no. 1 (1979): 339–359.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 345.

Therefore the point of the comparison is that the shifting standards of propriety in a linguistic interchange or a conversation are governed by implicit norms which, like a baseball score, are abstract entities. What is more, just as in baseball, correct play (or linguistic play) depends on what state this score is in, and lastly, the score evolves in a more or less rule governed way; Lewis calls this the kinematics of score: 'If at time  $t$  the conversational score is  $s$ , and if between time  $t$  and time  $t'$  the course of the conversation is  $c$ , then at time  $t'$  the score is  $s'$ , where  $s'$  is determined in a certain way by  $s$  and  $c$ '.<sup>337</sup>

Because a conversational score is made up of things that are permissible and impermissible, as Lewis says, Brandom frequently describes his model of linguistic behaviour under inferentialism as 'deontic scorekeeping',<sup>338</sup> that is to say it is concerned with keeping score of obligations and permissions: things you can say, things you must say, and things you must not say. In order to make sense of Brandom's idea of deontic scorekeeping, Jay Rosenberg imagines a simplified version of a linguistic community: The Islanders.<sup>339</sup> There are only four members of this idyllic community, Ada, Bill, Carl and Dee. All that these four talk about are the berries that grow on the island, which Rosenberg calls 'nuanceberries'. It is important to eat these berries only when they are ripe, as unripe berries are not nutritious, worse still they cause severe stomach upset. Luckily the young berries are white, and as they ripen they turn pink and finally a rich dark red.

Correspondingly, the islanders have a vocabulary for discussing these berries. They can say whether a berry is white, pink or red. They can say one berry is lighter or darker than another, and they can say that a berry is edible or inedible, or as Rosenberg has them say- 'yummy' or 'yucky'. It is a simple vocabulary, nonetheless Rosenberg contends that

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337 Ibid., 238.

338 For the meaning of 'deontic', see fn. 17

339 Jay Rosenberg, "Brandom's Making It Explicit: A First Encounter," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57, no. 1 (1997): 179–187.

it's enough for the Islanders to have a set of discursive practices rich enough to qualify them as Brandomian sapients, players of an asserting and reason-giving game who keep deontic scores on each other's assertional commitments and entitlements.<sup>340</sup>

The point of Rosenberg setting up this little story is to give some concreteness to Brandom's talk of deontic scorekeeping. The whole model of 'keeping score' centres on the idea that participants in a linguistic community 'keep track' of the commitments and entitlements that each other has, concerning the inferential relations between various claims. With our islanders, this concerns how they treat each other with respect to the claims they make, and certain material inferences that are licensed. For example, from 'that is pink' and 'this is darker than that' to 'this is red'; from 'that is white' to 'that is yucky'; from 'this is red' to 'this is yummy'. Therefore asserting the relevant premise commits you to the corresponding conclusion, furthermore, Brandom sees assertions as something that can be taken up and passed along as 'fodder for *inferences*',<sup>341</sup> that is, your assertion can be taken up by me and treated as a premise. Incompatibilities of course abound where scorekeeping is concerned, which is to say commitment to one statement such as 'this is red' means that you are not also entitled to 'this is white'.

The reason that Brandom refers to this as *deontic* scorekeeping is that it broadly concerns the normative aspects involved in being a competent language user, that is, your rights, entitlements and of course the requirements, or demands that are made of you. Brandom describes a structure of defaults, challenges that can be made, and circumstances of vindication. Being rational, talking, and thinking are all described by Brandom as simply learning to play the game of scorekeeping proficiently:

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>341</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 168.

In scorekeeping terms, the significance of a speech act consists in the way it interacts with the deontic score: how the current score affects the propriety of performing the speech act in question, and how performing that speech act in turn affects the score. Deontic scores consist in constellations of commitments and entitlements on the part of various interlocutors. So understanding or grasping the significance of a speech act requires being able to tell in terms of such scores when it would be appropriate (circumstances of application) and how it would transform the score characterising the stage at which it is performed into the score obtaining at the next stage of the conversation of which it is a part (consequences of application). For at any stage, what one is permitted or obliged to do depends on the score, as do the consequences that doing has for the score. Being rational – understanding, knowing how in the sense of being able to play the game of giving and asking for reasons – is mastering in practice the evolution of the score. Talking and thinking is keeping score in this sort of game.<sup>342</sup>

Scorekeeping on the island include such practices as perception, observation reports, acknowledgement of various degrees of authority, and furthermore these elements of discourse link to a certain dimension of practical conceptual content. So just as a commitment to ‘this is tasty’ also brings commitment to ‘this is red’, it also confers a license to eat, that is, a practical entitlement. A refusal to eat the berries one has been offered could, conversely, be justified by a piece of practical reasoning, for example from ‘that is white’ to ‘that is unripe’.

One point that Brandom is at pains to underline is the status of the scorekeeper in the linguistic game, as opposed to Lewis' baseball game. He illustrates this by mentioning the escalating claims by three umpires, the first who says ‘I calls ‘em as I sees ‘em’, the second who says ‘I calls ‘em as they is’ and the third who says ‘until I calls ‘em, they ain’t’.<sup>343</sup> There is a certain sense in which we treat the referee as turning a particular shot in to a goal, and if it doesn’t stand in the referee’s eyes, we say it isn’t a goal. Brandom says that in a certain sense the umpire in baseball ‘*makes* a throw into a strike when he *takes* it as a strike’<sup>344</sup>. However there is, as he notes, a way of

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342 Ibid., 183.

343 Ibid., 184.

344 Ibid.

using the scorekeeping vocabulary to establish a perspective from which the referee was mistaken, as in, ‘that ought not to count as a goal, there was a handball’, or ‘that was definitely a goal’ – even when it was not awarded, and so on. Brandom notes that linguistic scorekeeping has access to both perspectives;

on the one hand, the actual attitudes of scorekeepers are essential in determining the score. On the other hand, the formation of those attitudes is itself subject to norms; scorekeeping is something that can be done correctly or incorrectly.<sup>345</sup>

Thus we have the idea of individual scores for the players in a language game, which differs from Lewis’ baseball game where each stage of a game has a single score. Of course, were we to attribute individual scores to teams, or players there would most likely be large areas where their scores overlap, and indeed, this is true of language also. Almost everyone will share commitments to claims such as ‘ $2+2=4$ ’, ‘there have been dogs’, ‘red is a colour’, and so on. But as Brandom points out there will always be commitments and entitlements that are tied to different observable situations, and here the scores may diverge.

But there is a perspectival element in linguistic scorekeeping that has no analogue in baseball, it has already been mentioned with respect to the idea that the scorekeeper might have gotten things wrong. In linguistic interchange, scores are kept for each party, but furthermore scores are also kept *by* each party. So scorekeeping in a language game is doubly perspectival. Everyone keeps score for themselves, and others.

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid.



### 3.5.3.2 The Challenge Norm

If assertion is the practice of keeping score of one's own and others' commitments and entitlements, what norm governs it? In other words, what are the rules that determine whether we are playing the game of giving and asking for reasons correctly? In an early paper Brandom outlines 'moves' that are possible in the game:

The social practices governing the asserting game permit four different kinds of "move." First, one may utter a declarative sentence which has the significance of an assertion, that is, counts as undertaking justificatory responsibility and as issuing an inference license. Such assertions can function either as premises or as conclusions of inferences. Second, one may demand a justification of some claim from another interlocutor. Third, one may defer justificatory responsibility for a claim to another. Finally, one may recognize a claim as (having been) justified. To do so is to acknowledge the legitimacy of its authority over other assertions, that is, its availability to others as a premise in justifying further assertions.<sup>346</sup>

So this means that for the little community of islanders they challenge each other by making an incompatible assertion about the colour or ripeness of the berries. Regarding vindication, Rosenberg has written that that

Vindications can theoretically come in three varieties – justification, deferral, and invocation of one's authority as a reliable perceiver- and, in fact, one finds all three sorts among the Islanders, since, as experience has taught them, Ada is notoriously bad at discriminating yummy red berries from yucky pink ones; Bill and Carl also make mistakes, but much less frequently; and Dee has the keenest eyes of them all. Thus Bill might challenge one of Ada's assertions of "that is red" by asserting "that is pink". In response, Ada might produce some premises to attempt to justify her claim, e.g., "this is pink", "that is darker than this", or she might appeal to her reliability, say, by pointing to her eyes, but most likely (since she, too, knows that she's the least reliable perceiver among

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<sup>346</sup> Brandom, "Asserting," 646.

them), she will concede the point, for instance, by undertaking commitment to Bill's claim and asserting (the conclusion) "that is yucky". Should Carl or Dee then challenge this last assertion, Ada would be in a position to defer justification by, say, pointing to Bill.<sup>347</sup>

What Rosenberg is describing here is the 'challenge and default' norm of assertion.<sup>348</sup> It is largely an elaboration on an idea that we have already seen from Sellars – one of Brandom's major influences – when he described 'the game of giving and asking for reasons', indeed, the process by which we enter 'the space of reasons'.<sup>349</sup> Indeed it has a richer philosophical pedigree than that; 'this is the sort of picture of the practices of giving and asking for reasons that Wittgenstein suggests, but it is recognisable already in Socratic *elenchus*'.<sup>350</sup> This default and challenge structure of assertoric commitment is furthermore central to Brandom's project, eventually culminating in the promise of pulling the rabbit of objectivity out of a hat that seems deeply rooted in social and linguistic-community relativism,<sup>351</sup>

The proper question is not whether practices that incorporate such a default-and-challenge structure of entitlements are somehow in principle defective in view of some a priori rationalistic criterion of what it is to be *really* entitled to a claim. The proper question is rather, what sort of propositional contents can reason-constituting practices of this sort confer on the scorekeeping attitudes they govern, the deontic statuses they institute, and the performances they acknowledge as having the significances of assertions. The claim eventually to be made is that such practices suffice to confer objectively representational propositional contents on claims, objective truth conditions according to which the correctness of an assertion can depend on how things are with the objects represented by it, to the extent that the entire linguistic community could be wrong in its assessment

347 Rosenberg, "Brandom's Making It Explicit: A First Encounter," 180.

348 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 176.

349 Sellars, Scharp, and Brandom, *In the Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, 36.

350 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 178.

351 How and whether Brandom manages to give an adequate account of objectivity despite his system being heavily and fundamentally *perspectival* cannot be considered here, since, although it is perhaps the most interesting contentious question concerning *Making It Explicit*, and yet it is not directly relevant to our criticism of MacFarlane's relativism.

regarding it.<sup>352</sup>

Just as in any game, there are potentially sanctions involved in ‘issuing of an inference license’, which is how Brandom describes undertaking a commitment. For as well as undertaking a commitment oneself, there is the issue of entitlement to that commitment. Undertaking a commitment, or making an assertion to which you are not entitled violates a norm Brandom writes, it is like lending something that is not yours to give. The sanctions for violating such a norm are not external sanctions, easily interpreted as such, for instance, being beaten with sticks. Rather they are what Brandom calls ‘internal sanctions’, and here he gives the example of the fabled boy who cried ‘Wolf’.

Having several times committed himself to the claim that a wolf was present (thereby licensing and indeed obliging others to draw certain conclusions, both practical and theoretical) under circumstances in which he was not entitled by the evident presence of a wolf to undertake such a commitment and to exercise such authority, the boy was punished – his conduct practically acknowledged as inappropriate – by withdrawal of his franchise to have his performances treated as normatively significant.<sup>353</sup>

### 3.6 Summary

We are now in a position to state the relationship between truth and assertion according to Brandom. Starting with the broad pragmatic focus on ‘activity’ that we characterised as *BP*, we have now come to see that in all linguistic cases, the activity in question is that of asserting. Truth in particular turns out to be nothing more than a particular kind of assertion, since, all aspects of the traditional accounts of truth are jettisoned by Brandom, leaving only truth as an expressive device, that is, a useful tool by which we can make certain assertions we could not otherwise make.

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<sup>352</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 178.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

To summarise this chapter, we saw first that the main drive of Brandomian Pragmatism was an anti-descriptive, performative focus that he finds in William James' work. This approach is called phenomenalism by Brandom, because of certain structural elements it has in common with better known epistemological positions called phenomenalism. We noted and explored various problems with this label. We saw that both the approaches called phenomenalism and also the position called inferentialism were instances of this basic pragmatic prioritisation of activity and practical consequence over theory and talk of properties. On the basis of this discovery of the kernel of Brandom's system, we explored his account of truth, which turned out to be a deflationary account, along the very same lines, but with a difference. Only the metaphysical, 'truth as property' account was deflated, Brandom's positive account was that truth is an important *anaphoric* operator which enriches our ability to express ourselves. When truth is deflated, for Brandom, we are left only with a device in the service of making richer and more complicated assertions and claims. This idea lead us to finally realise our aim in this chapter, which was to reach an understanding of Brandom's account of assertion, the account that is so important to MacFarlane's project.

The accounts of truth and assertion that we are interested in here turn out, in a way, to be co-dependent. On the one hand, the commitment to a metaphysically deflated account of truth that is not a property leaves Brandom to focus on the activity of calling something true, which leads to an account of assertion. Thus all that remains of truth is the act of asserting or claiming. The importance of assertion thus stems from Brandom's metaphysical deflation of the relations of truth and reference, in his Pragmatism (phenomenalism); for given that focus, what else is there to focus on? On the other hand, the norms that govern such assertings, that is, the heavily social challenge and default system only makes sense given the focus on the 'horizontal' level of relations; of which the truth deflation is a paradigm case, or at least that is part of what we will argue in our final chapter.

## 4 Relative Truth, Deflationism, and Norms

### 4.1 Introduction

Following our examination of Brandom's norms of assertion and their place in his wider system, we can now raise the following question: Is MacFarlane really entitled to give the Brandomian account or assertoric norms in order to avoid the Evans objection? The argument of this final chapter will be that he is not, and after laying some foundations, we will pose a dilemma to MacFarlane based on how he ought to formulate his norms.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. We start with a closer look at the norms that we are dealing with (4.2), both MacFarlane's (4.2.1), and Brandom's (4.2.2), by questioning whether the norms that MacFarlane describes really are norms that we can find in Brandom's work. We note that there is in fact a clear difference between the Brandomian norms that MacFarlane recommends, and the norms that Brandom suggests govern the act of asserting. The major difference is that MacFarlane's norms as he states them still make explicit reference to truth, while Brandom's do not (4.2.3).

The next stage in the argument is to show that MacFarlane's position concerning truth relativism is incompatible with the sort of deflationary account of truth that we described in the last chapter as being the cornerstone of *BP* (4.3). We do this first by showing that MacFarlane's stated view of truth places him on the 'robust' side of the spectrum (as depicted by Künne) and as such, far away from the deflationary position (4.3.1). This argument is somewhat stipulative however, so we marshal two similar arguments from Crispin Wright, and Paul Boghossian, to the effect that any relativist about truth must at least hold some version of a robust theory of truth, that is, she cannot be a nihilist (4.3.2).

We move on to formulate our dilemma at (4.4). The dilemma is simple: when formulating the 'challenge and default' norm for assertion, either MacFarlane keeps the explicit reference to

truth (as in his actual formulation), or he omits it (as in Brandom's). We argue that if he includes it, then his norms really lapse back in to the truth norm which caused the trouble in the first place (4.4.1). However if he omits it, as Brandom does, he gets caught on the second horn of the dilemma (4.4.2), which plays on the connection between Brandom's norms, his truth-nihilism, and his inferentialist account of content. We argue that Brandom's stated norms make little sense without these accounts of truth and content, and so if MacFarlane accepts the norms as Brandom states them, he is pushed towards a double account of truth and content where he is committed to both a robust *and* a deflated account, rendering his attempts to relativise truth at best superfluous, and at worst incoherent. The dilemma pushes MacFarlane to either accept some form of *BP*, or fall prey to the Evans problem. Either one of these horns means that MacFarlane's project of relativising truth is untenable.

## 4.2 Norms

### 4.2.1 MacFarlane's Norms

Let us begin our comparison of MacFarlane's proposed norms of assertion to Brandom's with a recap of the norms that MacFarlane proposes in order to escape the fraught 'truth norm' that, as we saw, would otherwise lead him into difficulties. In 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth' they were as follows:

- (W) Commitment to withdraw the assertion if and when it is shown to have been untrue.
- (J) Commitment to justify the assertion (provide grounds for its truth) if and when it is appropriately challenged.

- (R) Commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts on or reasons from what is asserted, and it proves to have been untrue.<sup>354</sup>

This early formulation ought to give us pause though. MacFarlane has given us an account of doubly contextual truth, but here he seems to employ terms like ‘shown to have been untrue’, and ‘grounds for its truth’ as if these were unproblematic concepts. In more recent work, MacFarlane has moved to redress this, by getting more specific where contexts are concerned. Therefore W, J, and R are refined in the following way:

Here are three things that might be involved in a commitment (undertaken in a context  $c_I$ ) to the truth of a proposition  $p$ :

- (W) Commitment to withdraw the assertion if and when  $p$  is shown to be untrue as used at  $c_I$ .
- (J) Commitment to vindicate the assertion (by providing grounds for the truth of  $p$  as used at  $c_I$ , or perhaps by deferring to someone else who can) when it is appropriately challenged.
- (R) Commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts or reasons on the basis of the assertion and  $p$  proves to be untrue as used at  $c_I$ .<sup>355</sup>

As we can see, a context has been specified. But it is not a double context, that is, it is not yet an assessment sensitive set-up. This prompts MacFarlane to ask the following question:

Suppose we understand the ‘commitment to truth’ involved in an assertion in terms of some combination of (W), (J), and (R). Can we understand what it would be to commit oneself to the truth of an assessment-sensitive proposition? That is, can we construe (W), (J), and (R) in a way that allows that truth might be relative to contexts of assessment?<sup>356</sup>

<sup>354</sup> MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” 318.

<sup>355</sup> MacFarlane, “Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications,” 142.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

The problem is of course that W, J, and R talk about untrue as used at  $c_1$ , but as we have seen, relative truth involves specifying a context of assessment also. But which context of assessment should be the relevant one here? MacFarlane suggests the following three ‘natural options’:

1. The relevant context of assessment is the context in which the proposition was asserted (that is,  $c_1$ ).
2. Quantify over contexts of assessment: the proposition must be shown to be untrue relative to some/all/most contexts of assessment.
3. The relevant context of assessment is the context to which the asserter currently belongs.<sup>357</sup>

MacFarlane decides that the third option is the only one that can accommodate relative truth, since, it is the only one that gives an essential role to the concept of assessment sensitive truth. So with that in mind, we get a refinement of our original W, J, and R to suit the machinery of relative truth that we saw in Chapter Two. W\*, J\*, and R\* emerge as:

(W\*) Commitment to withdrawing the assertion (in any future context  $c_2$ ) if p is shown to be untrue as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ .

(J\*) Commitment to justifying the assertion (that is, providing grounds for the truth of p as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ ) if and when the assertion is appropriately challenged at  $c_2$ .

(R\*) Commitment to accepting responsibility (at any future context  $c_2$ ) if on the basis of this assertion someone else takes p to be true (as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ ) and it proves not to be.<sup>358</sup>

MacFarlane thinks that this makes room for assessment sensitive truth, writing that ‘[p]ace

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 145.



Burnyeat and Passmore,<sup>359</sup> then, we can make good sense of the idea of commitment to truth even if truth is relative'.<sup>360</sup>

### 4.2.2 Brandom's Norms

MacFarlane claims that this account of the norms of assertion is one he borrowed from Brandom, but how close is it really to the original? As we saw in the previous chapter, Brandom explains the norms that are in play by means of the scorekeeping metaphor. What scorekeepers keep track of in the scorekeeping game is commitments and entitlements, in other words the paradigmatic normative concepts of *can* and *must*. In particular, there are three inferential relations that must be tracked in the game of giving and asking for reasons, those are firstly, commitment preserving relations, that is, when commitment to one claim brings along with it a commitment to another. Secondly, we have entitlement preserving relations, which is when entitlement to one thing brings with it an entitlement to another thing. Finally there are incompatibility relations which is when one's commitment to something precludes an entitlement to another thing.

Brandom writes that:

[i]n producing assertions, performers are doing two sorts of things. They are first *authorizing* further assertions (and the commitments they express) ... [i]n doing so, they become responsible in the sense of answerable for their claims. That is, they are also *undertaking* a specific task *responsibility*, namely the responsibility to show

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359 Myles Burnyeat and John Passmore both argued that Protagorean Relativism is pragmatically self refuting, in that in order to assert that truth is relative, one must make a claim that purports to be true (non-relatively). Passmore writes that '[E]ven if we can make some sense of the description of p as "being true for x" . . . Protagoras is still asserting that "p is true for x" and "p is not true for y"; these propositions he is taking to be true. It has to be true not only for x but for everybody that "p is true for x" since this exactly what is involved in asserting that "man is the measure of all things." The fundamental criticism of Protagoras can now be put thus: to engage in discourse at all he has to assert that something is the case'. Burnyeat adds that 'No amount of manoeuvring with his relativizing qualifiers will extricate Protagoras from the commitment to truth absolute which is bound up with the very act of assertion'. John Passmore, *Philosophical Reasoning* (Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, 1970), 67; M. F. Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy," *The Philosophical Review* 85, no. 1 (1976): 195.

360 MacFarlane, "Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications," 146.

that they are *entitled* to the commitment expressed by their assertions, should that entitlement be brought into question.<sup>361</sup>

The set of norms that MacFarlane is drawing on stems from this ‘undertaking responsibility’. What do we undertake to do? One thing we can do is ‘issue other assertions that *justify* the original claim’.<sup>362</sup> So something like MacFarlane’s (J) can be located here. Something like (R) can be seen to stem from the idea that in making assertions we license others to draw on our assertions, and use them as points in the chain of inferences;

[f]or assertions are on the one hand what is communicated (made available to others), and on the other hand they are what communication is *for*: one interlocutor’s claim is fodder for inferences by others to further claims.<sup>363</sup>

### 4.2.3 The Difference

While it is true that ‘something like’ MacFarlane’s (J) and (R) can be located in Brandom’s work, MacFarlane’s rendition is not a direct quotation from Brandom, so we still need to ask how close these sets of norms are to one another. We should note that the term ‘truth’ occurs in each of MacFarlane’s norms, something we will take issue with later in this chapter. But for the moment we ought to just note that Brandom does not make any reference to demonstrating the truth of something, or withdrawing an assertion when it has been shown to have been ‘untrue’, as part of his norms.

Rather, it is the case that Brandom talks of demonstrating one’s entitlement to claims by ‘*justifying* it, that is, by giving reasons for it’, which would always consist in making more claims, more assertions.<sup>364</sup> He also discusses entitlement in terms of ‘appeal to the authority of another asserter’.<sup>365</sup> He discusses the ‘default and challenge’ structure of entitlement where one is under

<sup>361</sup> Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, 173.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

obligation to vindicate one's claim, when it is appropriately challenged, where an appropriate challenge takes the form of an assertion that is incompatible with the assertion being challenged.<sup>366</sup>

In the earlier paper 'Asserting',<sup>367</sup> Brandom doesn't talk about separate norms as MacFarlane does, instead, assertion seems to be governed by only one norm, *justification*, and that certainly seems to still be the case in *Making it Explicit*. There, Brandom is concerned with explaining the different ways that we can justify our claims, or defer justification, as well as the structural role that justification plays in entitling further claims, or assertions.<sup>368</sup> In 'Asserting', rather than specifying norms as such, there are just four 'moves' listed in the justified assertion game. Firstly, uttering a sentence that counts as an assertion commits you to justify that assertion if challenged, and licensing the sentence for further use in the web of inferences. The other three moves are demanding, deferring, and recognising justification, respectively:

The social practices governing the asserting game permit four different kinds of "move." First, one may utter a declarative sentence which has the significance of an assertion, that is, counts as undertaking justificatory responsibility and as issuing an inference license. Such assertions can function either as premises or as conclusions of inferences. Second, one may demand a justification of some claim from another interlocutor. Third, one may defer justificatory responsibility for a claim to another. Finally, one may recognize a claim as (having been) justified. To do so is to acknowledge the legitimacy of its authority over other assertions, that is, its availability to others as a premise in justifying further assertions.<sup>369</sup>

The stand-out difference between the norms is that all three of MacFarlane's norms mention truth, while Brandom nowhere does. Of course should not be surprised at this, given our investigation into his concept of truth in the previous chapter. However, it does seem that in both *Making It Explicit*, and 'Asserting', if there is a Brandomian norm, it seems to be that of

366 Ibid., 176.

367 Brandom, "Asserting."

368 Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, chap. 3.

369 Brandom, "Asserting," 646.

justification and its facets. According to Brandom, the norm of assertion appears primarily to be something like ‘Assert only that which you are prepared to justify’.

Rather than (W), (J) and (R) , or even their '\*' modifications, Brandomised versions of MacFarlane's three norms would have to make reference to things like ‘entitlement’ or ‘propriety’ instead of truth. They would probably look more like the following:

- (W<sup>b</sup>)            Commitment to withdraw the assertion if and when it  
                         is shown that you are not entitled to it.
- (J<sup>b</sup>)            Commitment to justify the assertion if and when it is appropriately challenged.
- (R<sup>b</sup>)            Commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts  
                         on or reasons from what is asserted, and it fails (J<sup>b</sup>)

So Brandom's norms are entirely socially circumscribed, as indeed we might expect. They concern issues such as, given the current conversational score, is the following assertion appropriate? Am I entitled to it? Am I committed to it? If it is the case that I think I am entitled to it, but others do not, do I need to justify it? Will appeal to authority count as justification in this circumstance, or will I need to do something more? Will they just take my word for it given that I am generally reliable? Nowhere does the truth of the assertion make an appearance as a substantive notion, rather, it is social acceptability and justification all the way. The demand for justification comes to an end when the justification is deemed acceptable to the community, or to your interlocutors:

[e]ach justifying consists of further assertings, which may themselves be challenged and stand in need of further justification. There is no point fixed in advance at which such a regress of demands for justification and for justification of the justification need end.<sup>370</sup>

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370 *Ibid.*, 642.

Justification, and hence the assertoric norms for Brandom are *entirely* social, and perhaps it is here that we can really see the influence that Rorty has had on Brandom. Justification simply is whatever the linguistic community treats as one.

In the ideal *Sprachspiele* of assertion as here delineated, the social significance of each performance is determined by how the community does or would respond to it ... [w]hether or not one claim justifies another, for example, is not determined by some objective semantic content or relations the sentences have and which the community must try to live up to or reflect in their social practices of recognizing some claims as justifying others. Rather, *a justification is whatever the community treats as one - whatever its members will let assertors get away with.* [my emphasis]<sup>371</sup>

### **4.3 Relative Truth and Deflationism are Incompatible**

#### **4.3.1 Robust and Deflationary Theories of Truth**

Part of the argument in this chapter is that a truth-relativist such as MacFarlane cannot subscribe to the sort of deflationism about truth that, as we have seen, underpins Brandom's system. We have already defined the sort of deflation that we are interested in as the thesis that truth is not a property, but what is the alternative to this? Deflationary accounts are often contrasted with what are variously called 'robust', or 'substantive' theories. I will first survey some of these stances in order to be clear on who answers what to which questions, and following that, I'll provide some reasons for thinking that a truth relativist must give some style of robust answer to the question 'what is truth?' We will look at a schematic from Michael Lynch, and then some more probing questions from Künne. Lynch's diagram provides a helpful overview that explicitly places

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 644.

Brandom’s favoured ‘prosentential’ theory in relation to other theories, and it impresses upon us how important the choice between a robust or a deflationary theory is. Lynch’s diagram is relatively straightforward however, and it lacks the detail that we will need in order to locate MacFarlane’s particular position on truth with respect to the other positions we have encountered.

When laying out the landscape of theories, Lynch provides the following chart, that branches at key questions, namely, a: does truth have a nature, and b: what is it? The answers to these questions define what Lynch describes as ‘the robust-deflationary continuum’.

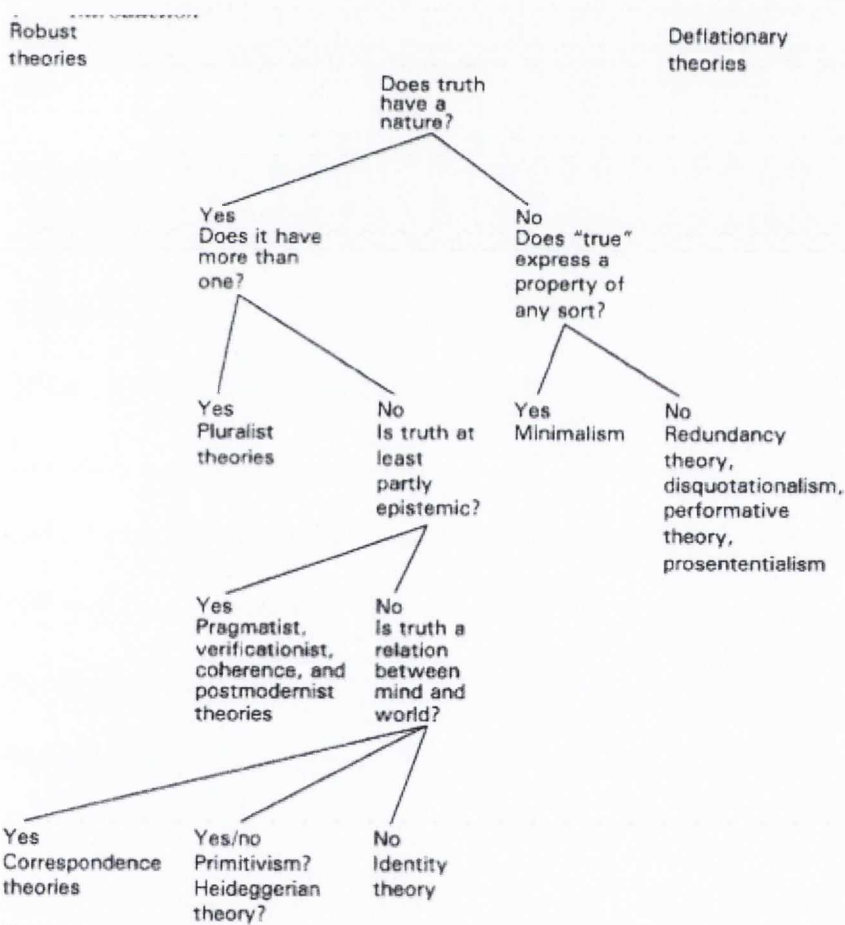


Figure 1 How various theories answer questions on the nature of truth, and where their answers place them on the robust-deflationary continuum

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372 Michael P Lynch, *The Nature of Truth: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, First ed. (MIT Press, 2001), 4.

As we already mentioned, the question of whether truth has a nature, or is a substantive property is almost a meta-issue in theorising about truth; a negative answer stops the debate before it even begins. In recognition of this, Boghossian has written that '[w]hether truth is robust or deflationary constitutes the biggest decision a theorist of truth must make'.<sup>373</sup>

The far right of the diagram will already be familiar to us, as we saw, 'redundancy theory', 'performative theory' and 'prosententialism' were all elements of Brandom's thinking about truth. All those elements of deflationism characterise negative answers to the questions 'does truth have a nature?' and 'does "true" express a property of any sort?'

So much for deflationism. But we want to know more about what characterises a 'robust' account, since we want to say that a truth relativist ought to be placed somewhere closer to that side of the 'continuum'. Künne performs an analysis similar to Lynch's, but more in-depth, based on sixteen *quaestiones de veritate*, as he calls them.<sup>374</sup> These questions start with basic choices a truth theorist must make, and depending on the answer, they get more specific. Answering Künne's questions on MacFarlane's behalf should help us locate his particular theory. As we already saw (in Chapter Three) Künne prefers to call Brandomian deflationism 'nihilism', and his first question is 'Is truth a property?' – to which nihilism answers 'no'. The line of questioning stops there. However, as we saw from Lynch, a robust theory obviously must say that truth *is* a property. If a relativist is to be situated in this continuum, where should we place him? Later in his *quaestiones de veritate* (questions 11-13) Künne asks 'Is truth a property of propositions?'<sup>375</sup> – to which we have good reason to believe that MacFarlane should answer 'yes'. We will shortly see some evidence from the paper 'Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths'<sup>376</sup> to that effect, but it seems to me clear that the following statement from 'Making Sense of Relative Truth' could not be clearer:

373 Boghossian, "The Status of Content," fn. 17.

374 Künne, *Conceptions of Truth*, 2.

375 *Ibid.*, 15.

376 MacFarlane, "Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths."

[r]elativism about truth is the view that there is at least one assessment-sensitive sentence. If we restrict the domain to natural languages, or to some particular language, we get a thesis that is at least partly empirical, while if we broaden it to all conceivable languages, we get a thesis that might be settled *a priori*. Two further subdivisions are useful. An *expressive relativist* holds that there is at least one assessment- indexical sentence, while a *propositional relativist* holds that there is at least one assessment-sensitive proposition. In what follows, I will focus on propositional relativism, which seems to me more promising in its applications.<sup>377</sup>

It seems clear therefore, that MacFarlane believes that truth is property of propositions. Following the path that Künne sets us, we must now ask MacFarlane ‘[i]s truth a stable property of propositions?’<sup>378</sup> Now, it seems clear to me that his answer *must* be no. If we look once more at the quotation above, we see that it refers to the assessment sensitivity of propositional truth. We have already learned in Chapter Two that it is the very *essence* of truth-relativism that one and the same proposition may hold different truth values at different times, or according to different parameters. Furthermore, assessment sensitivity should hold that one and the same propositional content can have different truth values *at the same time*, given the machinery of double contextuality (from Chapter One). Künne's book appeared just at about the same time that contemporary truth relativism was beginning to gather momentum (in 2005, see Chapter One for details of the chief publications in ‘new relativism’), and as such it misses out on discussing that debate. The positions that Künne associates with positive and negative answers to question 12 are ‘temporalism’ (truth *is not* a stable property of propositions) and ‘eternalism’ (truth *is* a stable property of propositions). But this should not surprise us since as we saw in Chapter One, MacFarlane draws an explicit link between truth-relativism and temporalism.<sup>379</sup> Relativism was seen as basically a more generalised form of temporalism; temporalism only had one shiftable feature, namely time, whereby relativism has

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<sup>377</sup> MacFarlane, “Making Sense of Relative Truth,” 312.

<sup>378</sup> Künne, *Conceptions of Truth*, 15.

<sup>379</sup> MacFarlane, “Nonindexical Contextualism,” 233.



potentially many, but they operate in the same way.

Künne's question 13 is one that can further help us to tie MacFarlane down to a particular view on truth- the question is 'can the concept of propositional truth be explained?' Künne calls a negative answer to this question 'propositional primitivism'.<sup>380</sup> Primitivism is a view that most will associate with Donald Davidson, who held that although a clear concept, truth was also our most primitive one. The title of the paper that the following quotation comes from speaks for itself, 'On the Folly of Trying to Define Truth' (in fact, the quotation is from the 'afterthoughts' to that paper).

[T]ruth is as clear and basic a concept as we have. . . . Any attempt to explain, define, analyse or explicate the concept will. . . either add nothing to our understanding of truth or have obvious counter-examples. Why on earth should we expect to be able to reduce truth to something clearer and more fundamental? After all, the only concept Plato succeeded in defining was [the concept of] mud.<sup>381</sup>

MacFarlane subscribes to this Davidsonian variety of primitivism, as we can clearly see in the following from 'Making Sense of Relative Truth'. Here we find MacFarlane addressing the challenge to give an account of what 'true-for-x' is supposed to mean, and he writes:

Relativists often try to meet this challenge by giving a definition of truth that makes its relativity plain. If truth is idealized justification, then it might reasonably be thought to be assessor- relative, since ideal reasoners with different starting beliefs or prior probabilities might take the same ideal body of evidence to support different conclusions. Similarly, if truth is defined pragmatically, as what is good to believe, then it might also be assessor- relative, insofar as different things are good for different assessors to believe. But although these coherentist and pragmatic definitions of truth capture the 'relative' part of 'relative truth', I do not believe they capture the 'truth' part. Indeed, for familiar reasons, I doubt that the concept of truth can be usefully illuminated by a definition in terms of more primitive concepts.<sup>382</sup>

380 Künne, *Conceptions of Truth*, 15.

381 Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Clarendon Press, 2001), 155–6.

382 MacFarlane, "Making Sense of Relative Truth," 312–313 and fn. 11.

MacFarlane himself appends the footnote ‘See Davidson 1997’ to the above quotation, so it is fair to say that MacFarlane is clearly a ‘primitivist’ in the Davidsonian sense, and since he also thinks that truth is a property of propositions, we should, (after Künne) call him a ‘propositional primitivist’. Künne categorises Davidson as a ‘sentential primitivist’ because he thinks that truth is a property of sentences rather than propositions. As far as propositional primitivism goes, it has a clear Fregean heritage: Künne marshals several pieces of textual evidence to show this:

Propositional primitivism is an important ingredient in Frege's reflections on truth, from his early to his late work:

Was wahr sei, halte ich für nicht erklärbar. [What is true, I hold to be not explainable.] ('Kernsätze zur Logik' [1880], in NS 189 (174))

Wahrheit ist offenbar etwas so Ursprüngliches und Einfaches, dass eine Zurückführung auf noch Einfacheres nicht möglich ist. [Apparently truth is something so primitive and simple that a reduction to anything still simpler is not possible.] ('Logik' [1897], in NS, 140 (129))

Hiernach ist es wahrscheinlich, daß der Inhalt des Wortes 'wahr' ganz einzigartig und undefinierbar ist. [Hence the content of the word 'true' is probably quite unique and undefinable.] ('Der Gedanke' [1918], 60)<sup>383</sup>

To sum up, MacFarlane's preferred theory of truth has the following elements. Truth is a property of propositions, but not a stable one. Furthermore truth is a primitive concept that cannot be defined in terms of anything more basic. If we wanted to categorise him *a la* Künne, we would say that he is a propositional primitivist, and also a propositional relativist. Propositions are the bearers of the *unstable* properties of truth and falsity, which are not further analysable in to simpler

<sup>383</sup> Künne, *Conceptions of Truth*, 16.

parts. On both Künne and Lynch's conceptual geographies this places him firmly on the side of robust theories. For Lynch, it would be because he thinks that truth *does* have a nature, and he clearly has affinities to what Lynch terms 'primitivism' on the robust side of his diagram. For Künne, as we have seen, it is because he thinks truth is a property of propositions, and hence, it is a property. That is enough to make his theory robust, just as in the previous chapter we saw that it was enough to make a theory deflationary that it answer 'no' to that same question.

### 4.3.2 Relativism and Deflation: Wright and Boghossian

We have distinguished between robust theories of truth and deflationary ones, and based on Künne and Lynch's schemata we have reason to suppose that relative truth, and MacFarlane in particular, needs to hold a version of the robust theory, mainly because we have been able to match various points that MacFarlane makes to points on Lynch and Künne's flowcharts. It could be objected here that this methodology is a little stipulative, since we have taken on a ready-made schema from Lynch and Künne, and simply placed MacFarlane in it. Furthermore it might be objected that not every truth relativist need share MacFarlane's affinities to propositional primitivism for instance. However, there are further, more specific arguments as to why we should attribute a robust theory of truth to truth relativism. In particular we will look at two arguments, from Wright and Boghossian respectively. Wright's point is directed towards MacFarlane and contemporary relativism, while Boghossian's is not, although the structural similarities are such that I think we should be able to adapt it to that purpose. Briefly, Wright's point is that Relative Truth is a development of the traditional 'binary' account of truth (i.e. 'truth is a relation holding between two things'), and as such it still counts as a robust answer rather than a deflationary one. Boghossian argues from the other direction, preferring to show that relative truth (in my adaptation of his

argument) is incompatible with a deflationary account since it must presuppose a robust account if it can even be formulated as a position. Rather than setting up a system and inserting MacFarlane in to it, these arguments are based on things that should be true of any truth-relativism. They purport to show that, necessarily, someone who holds that truth is relative must also hold that truth is a robust property, whereas the argument based on the Lynch/Künne schema only asserts that accidentally, MacFarlane the relativist *happens* to also hold a view of truth that counts as robust. The following arguments from Wright and Boghossian rather show what the relationship between truth relativism and robustness is.

Let's look at Wright's argument first, from 'Relativism about Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts about the Very Idea'.<sup>384</sup> Where Wright *actually* begins is with the statement that everyone *other* than deflationists should reckon truth to be at least a binary relation, that is, being made true by the relevant circumstances. Truth-relativism should then be thought of as *at least* ternary, since as we saw in Chapter One, a natural way of looking at the doctrine of relative truth, from Wright, was that it was characterised by the thesis of 'tacit additional relationality'.

An account of truth as binary is clearly a robust account, since it answers in the affirmative to the very question that defines the robust/deflationary divide, namely, 'is truth a property?' Adding characteristics of an assessor to the binary truth relation is what makes it a ternary relation, and that is also what makes it assessor sensitive, but that does not affect the fact that it still falls on the robust side of the truth theory divide.

But if we conceive of relative truth as still being a relation, albeit a more complicated one, we must ask, what is it a relation between? What is truth a ternary property of? Wright suggests that it would not be terribly interesting if we thought that truth was a ternary property of type-sentences, in other words 'truth-bearers whose *content* is variable'.<sup>385</sup> Such an idea is already at play in

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<sup>384</sup> Wright, "Relativism About Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts About the Very Idea."

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

contextualism, as defined in Chapter One. For truth relativism proper, we want truth to be a ternary property of propositions, or as Wright calls them, ‘beliefs’, or ‘thoughts’.<sup>386</sup>

We have already seen evidence from ‘Making Sense of Relative Truth’ that MacFarlane is interested in propositional relativism, so there should be no problem in attributing the view that truth is a ternary property of propositions. However in ‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’, where MacFarlane first puts forward his arguments, he equivocates between truth-bearers, and it is not always clear what he intends; since he refers to ‘what I asserted’ when talking about the truth value of the sea-battle assertion, but sometimes he refers to ‘my utterance’. He asks:

[w]hich of these arguments did I intend in FCRT? That is not at all clear. In the technical part of the paper, I talked of sentences and utterances, not propositions...[b]ut this is not what one finds in the (less formal) part of the paper where the argument is first presented:

- (29) Jake asserted yesterday that there would be a sea battle today.  
 There is a sea battle today.  
 So Jake's assertion was true.

Here Jake's speech act is described using indirect discourse ... by way of its propositional content rather than its sentential vehicle<sup>387</sup>

So MacFarlane acknowledges the ambiguity in ‘Future Contingents and Relative Truth’. The rest of that paper is given over to reconstructing his argument while acknowledging that ‘in ordinary speech, truth and falsity are almost invariably predicated of *propositions*’, and ‘[p]ropositions are often said to be the “primary bearers of truth value”’.<sup>388</sup>

It seems therefore, that MacFarlane acknowledges that his initial formulation of relativism

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>387</sup> MacFarlane, “Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths,” 93.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 94.

was misleading on the very issue of what the truth-value bearers are, resolving to make it work for propositions. Furthermore, he pointedly argues that propositions as truth-value bearers only means that other things that are said to be true are so in virtue of expressing a proposition, it does not however mean that ‘propositions have their truth values absolutely or intrinsically’.<sup>389</sup>

But Wright only starts with ‘apart from those (deflationists) who do not reckon [truth] to be a property at all’. If, by this, he meant to allow for the idea that there could be a deflationist truth-relativist, then he should have been firmer, since we can now see that there is no way to characterise relative truth other than as a ternary property. Consider: we can distinguish between relativism and non-relativism along the lines of the binary/ternary distinction. But if we were deflationists, how could we make that distinction? How could we explain that truth has ‘additional relationality’, if truth is not really a property, not a real relation? The idea that relative truth involves a shiftable parameter, whether that is ‘context of assessment’, ‘perspective’, ‘standard of taste’, or whatever else means that it requires a relation into which to insert that extra parameter. Indeed, when reconstructed in this way, Wright's argument leads naturally to Boghossian's, with which it shares certain structural points.

Boghossian's argument<sup>390</sup> intends to highlight a tension between ‘non-factualism’, and a deflationary account of truth. I think that once we have understood the structure of the tension we can see that a similar tension can be highlighted between truth-relativism and a deflationary account of truth. Non-factualism is described as follows:

[w]hat all non-factualist conceptions have in common – what in effect is constitutive of such a conception of a declarative sentence of the form ‘x is P’ - is

(1) The claim that the predicate ‘P’ does not denote a property

and hence

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Boghossian, “The Status of Content.”

- (2) The claim that the overall (atomic) declarative sentence in which it appears does not express a truth condition.<sup>391</sup>

We have already seen what a deflationary account of truth amounts to, it is the denial that truth is a real property. Truth is used rather to express assent, and for other expressive means detailed in our earlier discussion of anaphora and the prosentential theory (3.4.2.1). To highlight the tension Boghossian asks us what truth-aptness for the deflationist is – ‘what conditions a sentence must satisfy if, on a deflationary construal of truth, it is to so much as be a candidate for truth.’ He answers that

[t]wo minimal requirements suggest themselves: first, the sentence must be significant, and second, it must be declarative in form. Unpacking somewhat, the requirements are that the sentence possess a role within the language: its use must be appropriately disciplined by norms of correct utterance; and that it possess and appropriate syntax: it must admit of coherent embedding within negation, the conditional, and other connectives, and within contexts of propositional attitude.<sup>392</sup>

These conditions tally with the sort of thing we should expect to hear from the deflationist Brandom. When ‘true’ is nothing but an expressive device, then any syntactically correct, declarative (assertoric) sentence that conforms to the correct norms should be a candidate to be called true. So if that is the case, then Boghossian goes on to argue that:

[t]he tension between a deflationary understanding of truth and a non-factualist thesis stems from the fact that these requirements would seem also to be *jointly sufficient* for truth conditionality, on a deflationary understanding of truth. For if they are jointly sufficient, then there is *no more* to a sentence's being truth-conditional – genuinely apt for (deflationary) truth and falsity – than its being a significant sentence possessing

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391 Ibid., 161.

392 Ibid., 163.

the appropriate syntactic potentialities.<sup>393</sup>

But then, with such a loose and indiscriminatory criterion for truth-aptness, the deflationist cannot meaningfully formulate the paradigmatic instance of non-factualism that we saw at the start, or to put it another way, deflationism does not give the non-factualist a rich enough concept of truth to make its point:

[b]ut it is constitutive of non-factualism precisely that it denies, of some targeted significant, declarative sentence that it is truth-conditional. On a deflationary conception of what it is to possess truth conditions, there would be, simply, no space for such a possibility.<sup>394</sup>

The structural bridge that I want to build involves seeing why exactly this tension occurs. Boghossian does not make any connection to relative truth in this paper, but I think that we can make one by pointing out that the real problem here is that the non-factualist wants to distinguish between truth-apt areas of discourse, and non truth-apt areas, whereas the deflationist has far *too wide* a conception of truth-aptness to let him do that. The real problem then, is not specifically with non-factualism, it is rather with any theory that wants to make more distinctions concerning how truth functions than deflationism will allow it. Although the arguments are different, the following conclusion could also be drawn about truth relativism, substituting it for ‘a non-factualism about any subject matter’:

[a] non-factualism about any subject matter presupposes a conception of truth richer than the deflationary: it is committed to holding that the predicate ‘true’ stands for some sort of real, language independent property, eligibility for which will not be certified solely by the fact that a sentence is declarative and significant.<sup>395</sup>

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393 Ibid., 164.

394 Ibid.

395 Ibid., 165.



Non-factualism fails to be compatible with deflationism because it maintains a distinction that deflationism cannot countenance, namely between truth-aptness and the lack of it. In a structurally similar way, relative truth fails to be compatible with deflationism because in order to distinguish relative truth from the traditional sort of non-relative truth we need to say more about the truth relation than deflationism is willing to allow, namely we need to maintain that it is a relation between at least three things (as Wright pointed out).<sup>396</sup> Otherwise, we could not distinguish between relative truth and traditional non-relative theories.

The upshot is that we can draw two related conclusions about relativism and deflationary accounts of truth. First, we have reason to believe that relative truth should be classed as a robust account of truth because it is a modification of the idea that truth is a property of propositions, and hence it is a binary relation. Secondly, following the lead of Boghossian's argument, it seems that the formulation of relative truth requires that there be more to the truth relation than deflationism allows. Relative truth keeps truth inflated. In other words, deflationism does not give us a robust enough of a concept of truth to explain what exactly is *relative* about relative truth, and that seems unacceptable.

There is one final point we ought to make on this topic: we have so far assumed that showing that someone who tends towards a deflationary account of truth while being committed to a robust account has problems, but why should this be so? Boghossian answers that, to think that these two accounts could sit together is merely to pun on the word 'truth':

[w]hether truth is robust or deflationary constitutes the biggest decision a theorist of truth must make. But decide he must. It is an assumption of the present paper that the concept of truth is *univocal* as between these two conceptions, that a concurrent commitment to *both* a robust and a deflationary concept of truth would be merely

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396 Wright, "Relativism About Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts About the Very Idea."

to pun on the word “truth.” We should not confuse the fact that it is now an open question whether truth is robust or deflationary for the claim that it can be both. There is no discernible plausibility in the suggestion that the concept of a language-bound operator of semantic ascent might both be versions of the same idea.<sup>397</sup>

#### 4.4 A Dilemma

So far we have made two discoveries. First, that Brandom’s and MacFarlane’s norms differ in that MacFarlane still mentions truth, while Brandom focusses almost exclusively on a very social idea of justification. Second, we have discovered that relative truth has commitments to aspects of a robust theory, and so it is precluded from any sort of deflation concerning truth. We will return to the second, but as far as the first goes, we can say that when formulating the sort of deontic norms that MacFarlane and Brandom do, we can do one of two things. We can either keep reference to truth, as MacFarlane does, or we can jettison it, as Brandom does. In the remainder of this chapter I will argue that whichever one of these MacFarlane chooses has unwanted consequences for his theory. If he keeps his reference to truth, I will argue that his norms as formulated make tacit reference to the truth norm, and in fact ultimately rely on it being the main norm of assertion, and that is unacceptable for the Evans inspired reasons we have seen. However if he cuts the reference to truth out, and opts for a formulation closer to Brandom’s, then he runs the risk of becoming bound up in the deflationary conception of truth, which is incompatible with relativism, as we have just seen. The dilemma developed below, then, has two horns. Horn one, via the Evans problem, forces us to concede that truth cannot be relativised. Horn two, via Brandom’s norms, forces us to concede that the truth relation must be deflated, but as we have established, this is incompatible with truth being relative. Thus, the dilemma forces us to choose between two options, both of which lead to an unrelativised account of truth.

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<sup>397</sup> Boghossian, “The Status of Content,” fn. 17.

But could a relativist object here, that horn one of the dilemma assumes that non-relativised truth makes sense, and thus begs the question? In other words, if the relativist's arguments gives us independent reason to believe that truth is a relative concept, then we are not entitled to present a dilemma which assumes (with Evans) that objective truth is coherent.

I do not think that this objection holds however, since the Evans problem does not rely on there being a coherent alternative to relative truth (i.e. objective truth) in order to work. Evans, as we have seen, only argues that truth, when described as relative, is too unstable an object to aim at. If we cannot aim at relative truth (since this is unstable), and if we cannot aim at non-relative truth (since this is incoherent, according to the imagined objection), then assertion is not a case of aiming at truth at all. But this conclusion concerning horn one of the dilemma only pushes us towards horn two, that the norm governing assertion does not have anything to do with aiming at truth.

#### 4.4.1 Horn One: The 'Commitment' Norm Collapses Back into The Truth Norm<sup>398</sup>

Let's look at our norms W, J and R more closely, starting with W. It seems that, given the very structure of Evans' problem, we ought to still have an issue with any formulation of a norm that still aims at anything involving the truth. W is a commitment to withdraw an assertion if and when it is shown to have been untrue. In the case of relative truth, we already acknowledged that due to assessment sensitivity, the conditions under which assertion 'P' will be accorded the value 'True' or 'False' is various, and not subject to any rule in advance. What then is the difference between W, and a simple version of the truth norm? Withdrawing an assertion is the negation of an assertion, or rather the removal of its assertoric force. Consider the following norms. Why would 1

<sup>398</sup> Some of the arguments in this section also appear in Maria Baghramian and Richard Hamilton, "Relativism and the Norm of Truth," *Trópos*, *Rivista di ermeneutica e critica filosofica diretta da Gianni Vattimo e Gaetano Chiurazzi* Anno III (2010), no. n. 1, "Relativismo e Verità", edited by Piero Cresto-Dina (2010): 33–50.

be any less problematic than 2?

1. One must: withdraw P if P is not true
2. One must: assert P only if P is true

It is a consequence – on pain of making no assertions at all – that if one follows 1, one thereby follows 2. In other words, as soon as one commits to de-assert (to withdraw) that which is not true, one commits only to assert what is true, *unless* our asserter lives by the motto ‘I’ll see what I can get away with’. Such a person would not aim to assert the truth as such, but he would aim to withdraw assertions if they are shown to be untrue. There is something more than a little strange if this is supposed to be the norm governing our acts of assertion. Think of the problem in the following way: what would the point of a commitment to withdraw an untrue assertion be, unless it were a tacit acknowledgement of a higher norm, that we pursue the goal of countenancing only true assertions?

The whole point of Evans’ objection is that relative truth renders an aim, or indeed a commitment to do something involving the assessment of truth in the future nonsensical, since we cannot know what we are aiming at, or what we are committing ourselves to. It would seem that Evans’ objection would still stand against norm W, for just as it seems odd – if not impossible – to aim at something as yet undefined, it appears equally odd to commit yourself to something where the terms of the commitment are not circumscribed, or are liable to change. MacFarlane does not think so however, and he provides some analogies to support his point.

The pitcher argument: According to MacFarlane, to commit oneself to a context sensitive, and hence shifting truth, is logically no more complex than a commitment to refill a pitcher (at any future time  $t^2$ ) when it is known that the pitcher is empty (at  $t^1$ ).<sup>399</sup> The analogy, however, does not

<sup>399</sup> MacFarlane, “Making Sense of Relative Truth,” 320–1.

do the work assigned to it because of the differences between committing oneself to the relative truth of something, and committing oneself to fill an empty pitcher. I know what it means for a pitcher to be empty; the only thing I don't know very precisely is when this state will obtain. But with *W*, I don't know if or when my assertion will be shown to be untrue nor do I know what context of assessment its untruth will be relative to. A closer analogy is to commit oneself to refill the pitcher if and when it becomes empty, but not knowing what or who exactly determines emptiness. But could we logically commit ourselves to such an indeterminate action? I think not. Contrary to MacFarlane's arguments, the pitcher example provides a good analogy for truth being the aim of an assertion: to commit oneself to fill a pitcher is to aim to have a full pitcher.

MacFarlane may counter<sup>400</sup> that we can indeed have an idea of what a commitment to a variable or indeterminate goal is. Suppose I undertake the following commitment - each time somebody walks through that door, I will endeavour to greet him or her in their native language. Now, I don't know who will come through the door, and hence I don't know what language they will speak, so we cannot make it a specific commitment like 'I will greet the next person through the door in German'. The success conditions of my commitment are subject to an as yet undetermined context of assessment, and yet, the commitment is not nonsensical. But this analogy is not convincing either, for the setting almost inevitably presupposes a degree of success. For one thing, our linguistic greeter already possesses the information that he is supposed to greet people verbally, and knows what the conditions for fulfilling this task are. If we were to take seriously the idea that a context of assessment might be rich and various, and unknown in advance, then in this supposedly parallel case our greeter's commitments should not be fully determined. For example, It should be something along the lines of, 'I undertake to react appropriately to whoever comes through that door', where the greeter does not know what exactly would count as appropriate

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400 In fact, the following example was offered to me by MacFarlane in response to a similar criticism I made towards the 'pitcher' example, at the *Aporo* workshop on relativism at UCD in May 2009 (<http://www.aporo.org/relativism.html>)

behaviour, smile, formal handshake, a hug, a formal bow, stiff indifference, etc. ‘Appropriate behaviour’ in this case is a placeholder for an indeterminate type and number of actions and hence cannot be seen either as aim of behaviour, nor would it provide coherent content of a definite commitment. Just like the pitcher analogy, our commitment has become an undertaking so vague as to lack any content, and hence not qualify as a commitment.

In ‘Future contingents and Relative Truth’, MacFarlane provides yet another example in support of his position. Accepting the Evans view that a-contextuality does not provide us with a suitable candidate for a targeted assertion, we are asked to consider an alternative, illustrated by a multiplayer game:

When I was young, my friends and I used to play multi-player Rochambeau.<sup>401</sup> In this game, whether a move counts as winning varies from opponent to opponent. A play of ‘rock’ will win with respect to an opponent who plays ‘scissors’, but lose to one who plays ‘paper’. Though one cannot aim to win simpliciter, the game is not incoherent. It is just different from games in which winning is not relativised to opponents. Similarly, I suggest, assertions of a-contextual sentences, whose truth varies from one context of assessment to another, are not incoherent: they are just different from assertions of non-a-contextual sentences.<sup>402</sup>

In Evans’ picture of assertion one can aim to win simpliciter, with a-contextuality one cannot. But just as a player of Rochambeau can win or lose depending on the moves made by the other players, the players of our relativised language game can also aim to conform generally to the principles W, J and R, even though they don’t now know the exact circumstances in which one or more of these principle would be invoked, nor the exact contexts of assessment relative to which their assertions will be held to be true or untrue.

Once again, MacFarlane does not provide us with a convincing analogy and hence does not

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401 Also known as ‘Rock, Paper, Scissors’

402 MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” 334.

quite manage to undermine the case for the truth directedness of assertions. The players of Rochambeau, as in all other competitive games, aim at winning the game, the contention is that they cannot aim to win or lose simpliciter, but only relative to other players at the game. With each move of the game a player's status as a winner or loser would depend on and vary with what each of the other players does, and hence it could be characterised only relativistically. She will be making decisions based on the context of the game and whether these decisions lead to a win or not would depend on and vary relative to the actions of other players in the game.

The analogy does not quite work, because the scenario does not have the relativistic consequences MacFarlane attributes to it. There are two problems, firstly the overall strategy of the game is not necessarily relativistic in the sense outlined by truth-relativists, and second, the relationship between truth and assertion is different from the relationship between games and winning.

On the game side of the disanalogy, a rational player of Rochambeau will be aiming at a winning strategy – maximally from all other players and minimally at least from one – and would decide on her strategies accordingly. For instance, she may work out that in a four-player game it is easier to focus on two of the players only (for instance by concentrating on their body language and overall gaming strategies) and hence maximise one's wins in this manner. Such a game, if played well, would increase the chances of an overall win, even if our rational contestant loses the game relative to one of the other three players. In such a scenario, the players' aim or commitment to winning and the condition for achieving an overall win are a stable unmoving target, but the specific strategic decisions are of course contextual. A commitment to a relatively true assertion does not have this level of specificity.

We may ask more generally about the analogical suitability of the game of 'Rock, Paper, Scissors' (Rochambeau), for it seems that unlike other games, specifically goal-directed games, you

can't really rationally aim to beat the other player, since it is a game of chance. I may aim to play 'rock', but this is not really aiming to win, any more than playing the other two moves would be. In order to prove that this cannot be aiming to win, consider what it would be to aim to lose? In an obviously goal directed game like football, I would perhaps kick the ball in to my own net if I was aiming to lose. In Rock, Paper, Scissors, a play of Rock may well be aiming to lose rather than win.

If aiming to win is indistinguishable from aiming to lose, then I suggest that this is a game where aiming does not play a part. Regardless of whether the game is two player, or multi player, it seems that all we can do is hope that we make a winning play. It is no more *aiming* to win than what a gambler does by placing his chips on a random number. If this is the model that MacFarlane intends for assertion, then we are stuck with a picture whereby asserters are mere gamblers on the outcome of their assertions. This would make assertion a game of chance where we merely hope that what we say will count as true. All that MacFarlane's examples have shown us is that commitment to truth is still aiming at truth, or else it is just 'hoping' for truth, which is unsatisfactory.

Let us consider norm 'J', the commitment to justify. It involves commitment to justifying an assertion (provide grounds for its truth) if and when it is appropriately challenged. However, as Rorty suggests,

justification is relative to an audience and that we can never exclude the possibility that some better audience might exist, or come to exist, to whom a belief that is justifiable to us would not be justified...for any audience one can imagine a better-informed audience and also a more imaginative one – an audience that has thought up hitherto undreamt-of alternatives to the proposed belief. The limits of justification would be the limits of language, but language (like imagination) has no limits.<sup>403</sup>

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403 Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 18.



If this is true, then MacFarlane's norms of assertion still involve a relativised notion of commitment, which poses problems similar to that of aiming at an unstable target. More importantly, despite MacFarlane's disavowal, (J) goes to reaffirm the central role of truth in the assertoric speech act. Why should one aim to justify one's assertions, to provide grounds for them, unless one is aiming to make true assertions? J becomes a norm of assertion only with the implicit assumption that we are aiming to make true statements. Now, if truth is relative, as MacFarlane claims, we end up facing the very dilemma that Evans sketched and MacFarlane is attempting to avoid. It would seem that 'J' is either a restatement of the truth norm, or else it just switches the notion of 'truth' for that of 'justification'.

Finally, principle (R) involves the commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts on or reasons from what is asserted, and it proves to have been untrue.<sup>404</sup> MacFarlane maintains that

Asserting is a bit like giving one's word that something is so, and our reactions to assertions that turn out to have been untrue can resemble our reactions to broken promises. We feel a legitimate sense of grievance, especially if we have acted on what we were told.<sup>405</sup>

Criticisms parallel to the ones levelled against W and J apply here. For one thing, to be responsible for x, it is necessary to know what one is responsible for. The analogy with aiming is quite clear. However, if truth is relative then it is not at all clear where the responsibility of the asserter lies. Secondly, as in the previous two instances, the link between the norm of being responsible and norm of truth seems unbreakable. How are we to understand MacFarlane's suggestion that 'asserting is a bit like giving one's word that something is so' other than 'asserting involves a commitment that one is aiming to say what is the case, to make correct statements, or the speak the truth'? If this is right, R like W and J, ultimately links assertions to truth, so MacFarlane's

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404 MacFarlane, "Making Sense of Relative Truth," 318.

405 *Ibid.*, 319.

attempts to jettison the necessary connection between truth and assertion fails.

Let's sum up the objections against the norms that MacFarlane gives us, with respect to his most detailed formulations from his recent work.<sup>406</sup>

- (W\*) Commitment to withdrawing the assertion (in any future context  $c_2$ ) if  $p$  is shown to be untrue as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ .

Since the relevant standard at  $c_2$  is completely unknown, this is just as blind a commitment as the straightforward truth norm. Furthermore, does the withdrawal hold only for the context of  $c_2$ ? What happens if, at a later context, the original assertion is again found to be acceptable? Must we re-assert? In any case, W\* cannot be an adequate answer to Evans, since part of his objection was that relative truth cannot serve as a guide to action. All MacFarlane has given us is a guiding norm in how to rectify failure, but this would be as bad as telling someone how to apologise for failing to do what he was supposed to do in a given situation, rather than explaining what he was supposed to do in the first instance. Withdrawal of an untrue statement makes little sense unless your aim is to say true things.

- (J\*) Commitment to justifying the assertion (that is, providing grounds for the truth of  $p$  as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ ) if and when the assertion is appropriately challenged at  $c_2$ .

The question here is, what is the notion of justification doing? A commitment to provide grounds for the truth of an assertion, where that assertion is used at  $c_1$  and assessed at  $c_2$  is surely the exact same thing as simply aiming to assert something true as used at  $c_1$  and assessed at  $c_2$ , which is exactly the formulation that Evans took issue with. Justification for Brandom on the other

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<sup>406</sup> MacFarlane, "Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications."

hand stands in for the notion of truth, which for Brandom no longer names anything substantive. However MacFarlane is in just the same trouble there, since justification (as acknowledged by Brandom) would seem to be just as 'shifty', i.e. just as relative an idea as relative truth. If justification is standing in for truth, then it's not a cogent thing to aim at. If it's not, then we still appear to be aiming at truth.

- (R\*) Commitment to accepting responsibility (at any future context  $c_2$ ) if on the basis of this assertion someone else takes  $p$  to be true (as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ ) and it proves not to be.<sup>407</sup>

Again, this is a commitment to an undefined thing. Why should we take responsibility for truth and falsity relative to future unknown, perhaps as yet undreamed of contexts? Apart from the problem of commitment to unknown things (if, as seems reasonable, we can imagine commitment as an aim to do something), there seems little reason to assent to this unless we were already committed to assert truths as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ , and this re-ignites the Evans objection.

#### 4.4.2 Horn Two: Relative Truth is Incompatible with Brandom's Norms

The dilemma I want to suggest that MacFarlane faces is a simple one. Either one's norms of assertion contain explicit reference to truth, or they don't. We have seen that MacFarlane's *actual* rendition of the norms do contain such a reference, and that this is problematic to the point of being unacceptable. MacFarlane claims that these norms are Brandomian, and yet, as we saw, Brandom's actual norms do not contain any reference to truth. So the following question suggests itself to us: could a statement of the norms of assertion that was closer to Brandom's, that is, a set of norms with no reference to truth, save MacFarlane? For the purposes of arguing the second horn of

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 139–40.

the dilemma we will assume that MacFarlane does actually endorse such a set of norms ( $W^b$ ,  $J^b$ , and  $R^b$ ), even though he doesn't. We will reach the conclusion that even if he did decide to endorse these more Brandomian norms, he would not be entitled to do so.

If indeed MacFarlane were to endorse such a set of norms, our first question might be something like this. Let's imagine that MacFarlane holds  $W^b$ ,  $J^b$ , and  $R^b$ , which we saw at 4.2.3. These norms contain no reference to truth, but *why don't they?* That is, why would MacFarlane's norms not be supplemented by something like '(T): Commitment to assert only what is true'? Brandom can answer this, because he has deflated the truth relation. So when we ask, why is there no norm 'T', Brandom can respond that truth is nothing above and beyond the practices of assertion embodied by  $W^b$ ,  $J^b$ , and  $R^b$ . But as we saw in 4.3, such a response is not open to MacFarlane, since truth relativism is incompatible with truth deflation. It looks as though MacFarlane's (imagined) truthless norms are lacking in motivation.

Perhaps this is a weak claim though. To be sure, Brandomian norms fit more readily with a deflationary account than with relative truth, but nonetheless, perhaps further justifications are open to MacFarlane? What, after all, is to stop MacFarlane declaring that among the many accounts of assertion on offer, Brandom's is simply the most attractive?<sup>408</sup>

Failing that, perhaps a dovetailing of relative truth and inferentialist norms of assertion is the only option open to MacFarlane, given Evans' objections? Perhaps he might argue that, although it appears a little *ad hoc*, BP is not without its problems, and so it is better to accept an amalgamation of relative truth with inferentialist assertion, than to accept the whole of BP? If this were correct, the worst we could accuse MacFarlane of would be presenting an inelegant or slightly ungainly account. There are reasons to believe, however, that we can make a stronger case that MacFarlane is

<sup>408</sup> Assertion taxonomy: recently Brown and Cappelen (2011) have singled out the Truth rule, the Knowledge rule, the Warrant rule and the Belief rule as possible norms that individuate or govern assertions. Apart from norm based accounts they describe theories of assertions as illocutionary acts, assertions as defined by effects (Stalnaker), the commitment based account (Brandom, MacFarlane), assertions defined by their causes, as well as "debunking views" to the effect that there is no one true account of assertion, which is Cappelen's own view (Brown and Cappelen 2011, 2-4)

not entitled to give Brandom's set of norms as his account of assertion.

Let us recall, with Boghossian, Künne et al, that there are really only two broad options concerning our account of truth: we can either give a robust account, or not. Recall further, that Wright has argued that the truth-relativist ought to be aligned with the robust account, since it is a modification of this relation, while the deflationist rejects the very question that allows the discussion to get under way in the first place.

The picture that we have is quite close to the distinction that Huw Price has drawn on several occasions as part of his project to globalise Blackburn's quasi-realism. He most often makes the distinction with reference to representation, but we can easily broaden his idea to include the notion of truth. He writes

If we consider the notion of a representation (type or token), as it is used in cognitive science and contemporary philosophy of language and mind, I think we can usefully distinguish two nodes, around which the various uses tend to cluster. One node gives priority to system–world relations. It stresses the idea that the job of a representation is to covary with something else – typically, some external factor, or environmental condition. The other node gives priority to the internal role of a representation, in a network of some kind. A token counts as a representation, in this sense, in virtue of its position, or role, in some sort of functional or inferential architecture – in virtue of its links, within a network, to other items of the same general kind.<sup>409</sup>

Price notes that Brandom's system should be associated with the second, 'internal function' idea, (pp 98-99), indeed, our Chapter Three contained ample evidence that this is the case. In a recent presentation, Price made a link to a similar distinction in the work of Wilfrid Sellars, between the 'generic' sense of 'true, which is 'correctly assertible', and the 'specific' sense, which involves 'picture correspondence'.<sup>410</sup>

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409 Huw Price, "Expressivism for Two Voices," in *Pragmatism, Science and Naturalism*, ed. Jonathan Knowles and Henrik Rydenfelt (Peter Lang AG, 2011), 102.

410 Huw Price, "Expressivism for Three Voices" (presented at the Sellars Centenary Conference, UCD, 2012), [www.sellarscentenary.com](http://www.sellarscentenary.com).

Brandom's norms lie entirely within the word-word system of relations, which Price would place with the second, internal function family of concepts. Truth for Brandom means an expressive tool, and in other respects it has been replaced by the notion of justification. This account, of course, leaves truth out of its statement of norms, but it would seem that focussing entirely on justification and propriety can *only* make sense given the acceptance of the pragmatic insight that we discussed in Chapter Three. But that pragmatic insight, that we first describe doings, claimings, deferrings and challengings, leads directly to the truth deflation; pragmatism simply has no room for any other type of truth, and this is incompatible with relative truth.

MacFarlane however, seems to be committed to both sides of Price's distinction. We have already seen that he is committed to truth as a primitive (though unstable) property of propositions, and as such he seems committed to Price's 'system-world' relations. However by giving us Brandom's norms, he is also committed to the inferentialist's 'internal role' idea.

Consider it this way. In *BP*, the external, vertical (in the sense of a word-world relation) is left out, worse, it is nonsensical. We have manoeuvred MacFarlane towards this account via separate Evans style arguments. But then where does the concept of truth feature in MacFarlane's account of assertion? Either it resides, as it did traditionally, in the relation between the proposition and the world, albeit modified by the shiftable features of context, or else, it resides, as in Brandom, at the 'horizontal' level, that is, among relations of inference. We can write this second option off, since if truth resides at the inferential level, this reduces it to either anaphora or propriety and justification, both of which amount to a deflation that is incompatible with relative truth. However if it resides in the 'vertical' relation, it would seem odd that it has no truck with our account of assertion, especially since it was part of MacFarlane's original aim in 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth' to embed his account of relative truth in an account of assertion.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> MacFarlane, "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," 328. 'I shall show how a standard framework for the semantics of indexicals can be modified to allow for relativity of truth to a context of assessment. In the next [section], I shall show how the modified framework can be integrated with a plausible account of assertion'.

If truth resides so far apart from the account of assertion, we may ask, what was the problem with the sea battle in the first instance? Giving an account of assertion entirely divorced from the concept of truth seems to be tantamount to forsaking the practical significance of the distinction between truth and falsity; truth would now become an abstract concept of no consequence. In that case, what would distinguish it from how we might imagine Brandom's treatment of the sea battle? Although Brandom doesn't actually address it, we could take an educated guess at what it would look like. Jake would assert, 'there will be a sea battle here tomorrow', and Sally would challenge him, appropriately, for justification. She might say, 'how can you know that, do you have a crystal ball or something?' The discussion would move into the territory of justification, Jake might respond, 'no, but I heard the Admiral talking about it in the war room', thus deferring justification to one better placed than him. Nevertheless Sally might insist that 'you may very well be right, but you just can't know for sure what's going to happen, it might still go either way'. Depending on what sort of state the standards of justification are in, Jake may be forced to retract it, on pain of being viewed as the sort of person who makes wanton assertions that he is not entitled to. On the other hand he might produce more convincing justification and be entitled to his assertion. The next day, deafened by the cannon, Sally may very well say something like 'what you said yesterday was/turned out to be true'. This story respects our intuitions, but it doesn't require truth to be relative, because for Brandom we are just keeping score of what we think one another is entitled to say and infer. Brandom gives us a picture of asserting without truth, but if Macfarlane does too, what separates them, and what role is there for relative truth?

On the other hand, as we have pointed out above, there is only room for two senses of truth at the horizontal level, those are truth as justification, and truth as expressive. As Brandom argues (see our 3.4.2.1, above), the expressive account rules out appeal to truth as explanatory (robust). However if by truth we mean justification, then the project of relativising truth is trivial, for by most

accounts justification is already relative to an audience (as Rorty points out, *op.cit.*).

For Brandom, the starting point of his account is the pragmatist's conviction that the only thing we can properly make sense of is the practice of making certain linguistic moves, making assertions that we authorise other people to act on. Between  $W^*$ ,  $J^*$  and  $R^*$  we have the detail of this account. Translinguistic objectivity has no place here, if my assertion is not acceptable to the community, I must withdraw it. If I can justify it, I am entitled to it. If I pass it along with my blessing and it turns out not to pass muster among my fellows, I am sanctioned. Why, we might ask, would  $R^*$ , in particular, be an important norm, unless we were working within the inferentialist's web of interconnected assertions, and inference licenses?

The pragmatist inferentialism implied by the norms of assertion  $W^*$ ,  $J^*$  and  $R^*$  has its own account of assertoric/propositional content however, and it makes no reference to truth conditions, indeed, as Brandom argues above, the idea of content given to us by inferentialism precludes any notion of content explained via truth conditions.

There is thus a fundamental ambiguity in MacFarlane's system. For both the traditional correspondence truth theorist, and for the standard relativist, content is provided somehow by something in the world, and the connection we make with that something through speech, assertion and so on. For Brandom, content is provided by the horizontal inferential, normative roles that make up our interpersonal communication, our linguistic action. But for MacFarlane, it is unclear whether the content of our assertions, utterances, and the like is provided by the truth relation (vertical) or by the assertoric norms (horizontal). If it is the first, it is hard to see how MacFarlane can hang on to the inferentialist picture about assertion, since it seems, at least according to Brandom, that this involves a denial of any meaningful vertical relation concerning assertion or truth. However if it is the second, then it seems that all the semantically agile reconfigurations of the vertical truth relation that MacFarlane performs in order to 'make sense of relative truth' were at best unnecessary, and at



worst contradictory.

The bottom line seems to be that inferentialism, that is, the focus on the norms of scorekeeping in the assertion game rather than the truth conditions of the sentences uttered, only makes sense given the type of inferential content (and hence the kind of deflation of the concept of truth) that Brandom favours. But that concept is incompatible with truth being relative.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

To sum up and conclude briefly, we began by showing the motivations for contemporary relativism about truth, and we explored some of its main features in Chapter One. In Chapter Two we focussed on MacFarlane's relativist system which focusses on the idea of a double context: relativising truth not only to a context of utterance, but also to a context of assessment. We noted however, that a serious threat to the coherence of this system is posed by Gareth Evans' contention that such a conception of truth is too unstable to aim at, and so truth cannot function as norm of assertion. This threat prompted MacFarlane to offer us an alternative norm, in order to save his position from incoherence. Since the replacement norm was heavily based on the work of Brandom, we explored the origins of Brandom's account of assertion and truth in Chapter Three, arguing that he presents us with a deflated, yet still expressively important account of truth, and a normative account of assertion that makes no reference to truth, but rather focusses on norms of justification and propriety. In Chapter Four, we took these findings and raised a problem for MacFarlane concerning the acceptability of his response to Evans. We posed a dilemma whereby both his current version of the Brandomian 'challenge' norm, and an imagined version that was more authentically Brandomian have unacceptable consequences for MacFarlane's relativisation of truth. Thus, it is the conclusion of this thesis that MacFarlane fails to provide an adequate response to Evans' challenge.

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