

Relativism, the Open Future, and Propositional Truth

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Abstract In his paper “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” John MacFarlane argues for truth relativism on the basis of the possibility of the open future. He defends the relativization of a truth predicate of linguistic items: utterances of sentences produced in concrete contexts. In more recent work, however, he contends that this was wrong, because when propositions are taken as truth bearers, the truth absolutists he was objecting to have an escape, and offers a new argument for relativism based on the semantics of “actually.” Here, I will critically examine these points. In the first place, I will suggest that the new argument concerning “actually” is not convincing. More importantly, I argue that truth absolutists should not accept MacFarlane’s “gift,” that is, his proposal for them to resist his previous arguments once they take truth to be a predicate of propositions: *if* there was a good argument in “Future Contingents and Relative Truth” for truth relativism taking truth as a property of linguistic items, there is still one when taking it as a property of propositions; these issues do not depend on the nature of truth bearers. I conclude by outlining what I take to be the best line for truth absolutists to take regarding the open future.

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20 **Preamble**

21 In his paper “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” John MacFarlane (2003)
 22 argues for truth relativism on the basis of the *a priori* possibility of the open future.
 23 He defends the relativization of a truth predicate of linguistic items: utterances of
 24 sentences produced in concrete contexts. In more recent work (2008, 94), however,
 25 he contends that this was wrong, while, on the one hand, taking linguistic entities
 26 such as sentences or utterances as truth bearers goes against ordinary usage,¹ on the
 27 other, his arguments depend at crucial points on intuitions about ordinary truth
 28 predications.² Moreover, he contends that, once his arguments are evaluated with
 29 respect to a reconstruction of the ordinary truth predicate applied to propositions,
 30 truth absolutists – in particular, truth absolutists defending supervaluationist accounts
 31 of truth vis-à-vis the open future – are in a position to resist them. Fortunately for
 32 him, he has a new argument for truth relativism, this one based on the semantics of
 33 the “actually” operator.

34 In this chapter, I will critically examine these points. In the first place, I will
 35 suggest that the new argument concerning “actually” is not convincing. More
 36 importantly, I want to argue that truth absolutists should not accept MacFarlane’s
 37 “gift,” that is, his proposal for them to resist his previous arguments once they take
 38 truth to be a predicate of propositions: *if* there was a good argument in “Future
 39 Contingents and Relative Truth” for truth relativism taking truth as a property of
 40 linguistic items, there is still one when taking it as a property of propositions; these
 41 issues do not depend on the nature of truth bearers.

42 The latter point turns on the nature of truth relativism, and so my main aim is to
 43 contribute to clarifying this issue. Several people, MacFarlane himself among
 44 them, have distinguished two varieties among recent truth-relativist proposals: a
 45 “moderate” one (which MacFarlane, with a descriptively accurate label, calls “non-
 46 indexical contextualism” – the proposal advanced by Kölbel (2004), for instance)
 47 and a more “radical” one, which is the one that he himself endorses (under the
 48 simpler label “relativism”). According to my own (2008) previous suggestions for
 49 characterizing the debate, which in their turn follow Evans’ (1985), the two varieties
 50 correspond to *content-truth* relativism, which is not worrying and is, I think, an

¹ As he (2005, 322) puts it, “there is something a bit odd about calling utterances or assertions, in the ‘act’ sense, true or false at all. We characterize actions as correct or incorrect, but not as true or false”; assertions in the object sense – “what is asserted” – are according to him (2008, 93) just propositions.

² Austin (1950, 119) – who had as good an ear for common usage as anybody – pointed out that it is also far away from common usage to predicate truth of propositions, in the philosophers’ sense. Ordinary language predicates truth of *things said*, which in my own view are not just propositions, but propositions taken with a generic constative force.

adequate semantic proposal for some applications, and *assertion-truth* relativism, which may well be incoherent and which in any case we should resist, for reasons already outlined by Evans. I will argue that by accepting MacFarlane's proposals the purportedly truth absolutist ends up embracing the latter – which would make his views doubly incoherent, if assertion-relativism is so already. Thus, truth absolutists have every reason to reject MacFarlane's poisoned gift.

This leaves us with the original argument for relativism based on the open future, which, if my main point in this chapter is correct, still stands when we take propositions to be our primary truth bearers. Although this will not be my main concern here, I will rely on recent work by Greenough (ms) and Barnes and Cameron (2009), as well as a previous proposal by Tweedale (2004), to suggest that, at least if we take for granted the atemporal metaphysical foundations that MacFarlane himself assumes, the truth absolutist has no need for worry.

This chapter is structured in four sections. In the first, I present MacFarlane's (2003) original argument for truth relativism based on the open future and then his (2008) recent worries about the original argument and his suggestion for how the supervaluationist can resist it. In the second, I present his new argument concerning "actually" and show why it is unconvincing. The third section discusses the core issues just summarized concerning the irrelevancy of the nature of truth bearers for disputes concerning truth relativism. The final concluding section outlines the view I favor to resist truth relativism based on the open future.

MacFarlane's Original Argument and the Truth Absolutist's Alleged Escape Through Propositional Truth

There are *dynamic* (presentist, growing-block-theoretical, etc.) and *static* ways of thinking of the metaphysics of the open future. MacFarlane assumes a static, atemporalist way of presenting the issues, and it will be convenient for me to follow suit – although, at the end of the day, this might betray the most fundamental problems at stake. The assumption is that the basic particular facts until a given moment in time m_0 (today) – which we will think of as specified in tenseless language – plus the laws of nature leave open several possibilities: on a history h_1 open at m_0 , there is a sea battle at m_0 plus one day (tomorrow), m_1 in h_1 ; on another h_2 , there is peace at that time in that history, m_2 .³ At m_0 , Jake assertorically utters (1):

- (1) There will be a sea battle tomorrow.

³ I follow MacFarlane (2003, 323) in presupposing "the metaphysical picture of objective indeterminism articulated in N. Belnap *et al.*, *Facing the Future* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 29–32, 139–41. Moments are idealized time-slices of the universe, partially ordered by a causal–historical precedence relation ($<$) with no backward branching, and histories are maximal chains of moments." Cf. also Thomason (1970). In speaking of "basic particular facts," I am gesturing in the direction of any adequate way of putting aside "facts about the future" such as the fact that it is true in 1492 that the Olympic Games were going to be held in Barcelona 500 years later.

84 “Is his utterance true or false?” MacFarlane (2003, 323) asks and goes on to argue
 85 as follows: “The utterance takes place at m_0 , which belongs to both h_1 and h_2 . In h_1
 86 there is a sea battle the day after m_0 while in h_2 there is not. We may assume that
 87 nothing about Jake’s intentions picks out a particular history (h_1 or h_2). Jake may
 88 take himself to be making a claim about ‘the actual future history’, but if this means
 89 ‘the future history that includes this utterance’, then it is an improper definite
 90 description. There is no such unique history. Given that nothing about the context of
 91 utterance singles out one of the histories of which it is a part, symmetry consider-
 92 ations seem to rule out saying either that the utterance is true or that it is false. Thus,
 93 it seems, we must count it neither true nor false. This is the indeterminacy
 94 intuition.”

95 MacFarlane then argues that a supervaluationist account of the truth conditions
 96 of utterances (modeled here as sentences in contexts) provides the best way of
 97 capturing this alleged *indeterminacy intuition*. For familiar reasons into which we
 98 do not need to go here, we need double indexing of the *points of evaluation* posited
 99 by our semantic machinery (distinguishing *contexts* and *indexes*), in order to
 100 discriminate the relativization of the semantic values of context-dependent expres-
 101 sions such as indexicals (which depend on nonshiftable features of context)
 102 from that of expressions whose values depend on indexes shiftable by operators.⁴
 103 For present purposes, we only need to care about the relativization of truth values
 104 to the times of contexts and histories passing through them.⁵ Thus, to illustrate, we
 105 define as follows the semantics of a “settled at m ” operator:

t1.1 (Sett _{m}) \lceil Sett _{m} : $\phi \rceil$ is true at a point of evaluation $\langle C, h \rangle$ if and only if, for every
 t1.2 h' overlapping with h at m , ϕ is true at $\langle C, h' \rangle$

107 When we consider the evaluation of an utterance of a sentence at a context, we
 108 fix the relevant parameters in these relativizations, thus obtaining an absolute truth
 109 value; this is how the supervaluationist account, to be discussed here, proposes to do
 110 it, with $H(C)$ designating the class of histories overlapping at C :

t2.1 (SVT) ϕ is true [false] at a context of utterance C if and only if ϕ is true [false] at
 t2.2 every point $\langle C, h \rangle$ such that $h \in H(C)$.

112 (SVT) assigns an absolute truth value to Jake’s utterance of (1), which agrees
 113 with the indeterminacy intuition: on this proposal, the utterance is neither true nor
 114 false at m_0 , the time of Jake’s utterance.

115 The problem with this, MacFarlane (2003, 324–5) argues, is that given the abso-
 116 luteness of utterance truth on this proposal, it cannot capture a *determinacy intuition*
 117 we also allegedly have when it comes to *retrospective* assessments of utterances
 118 such as Jake’s: “But now what about someone who is assessing Jake’s utterance

⁴ See Kaplan (1989) and Lewis (1980) for clear expositions of those familiar reasons and different versions of the ensuing framework.

⁵ I am presenting the arguments in MacFarlane’s (2003) using the terminology in his (2008), for ease of exposition. As far as I can tell, nothing hinges on these decisions.

from some point in the future? Sally is hanging onto the mast, deafened by the roar of the cannon. She turns to Jake and says ‘Your assertion yesterday turned out to be true’.” Sally’s reasoning appears to be unimpeachable:

- (2) Yesterday, Jake asserted the sentence “There will be a sea battle tomorrow.”
 There is a sea battle taking place today.
 \therefore The assertion that Jake made was true.

Sally’s reasoning is additionally supported by Dummett’s (1969/1978, 363) *Truth-Value Links* – the principles that articulate necessary connections of truth value between variously tensed sentences conceived as uttered at different times, such as this:

- (TVL) “There will be a sea battle tomorrow” was true if uttered at d iff “There is a sea battle today” is true if uttered at $d+1$.

MacFarlane argues that the best account of the case is given by relativizing the truth of utterances to *contexts of assessments*, which ontologically are the same kind of thing as context of use, “a concrete situation in which a use of a sentence is being assessed” (2005, 309):

- (RT) ϕ is true [false] at a context of utterance C_U and a context of assessment C_A
 iff ϕ is true [false] at every point $\langle C_U, C_A, h \rangle$ such that $h \in H(C_U) \cap H(C_A)$.⁶

If we evaluate Jake’s assertion with (RT) simultaneously when it is made, so that $C_A = C_U$, it is neither true nor false exactly as it was using (SVT), because both h_1 and $h_2 \in H(C_U) \cap H(C_A)$, but now, if we evaluate it with Sally’s as context of assessment, it turns out to be true, because non-sea-battle-at-that-time histories are ruled out from then on. We thus capture the determinacy intuition, while sticking to the supervaluationist’s diagnosis of the indeterminacy intuition. Later on, we will be in a better position to appreciate the cost we have incurred in obtaining this result. Let us now move on to MacFarlane’s (2008) recent qualms about this argument for truth relativism.

The problem he sees, as announced above, is that the argument is based *on intuitions we are supposed to have* as regards the evaluation of claims or assertions in the face of the open future, but we do not have any intuitions when it comes to evaluating linguistic items such as utterances, because this is not a practice that we follow in ordinary parlance. In fact, as MacFarlane notes, Sally’s argument (2) was not presented in his original paper, as it is above, but thus:

- (3) Yesterday, Jake asserted that there would be a sea battle tomorrow.
 There is a sea battle today.
 \therefore Jake’s assertion was true.

MacFarlane (2008, 94) comments on this as follows: “I think there is a reason I slipped into proposition talk in giving the retrospective assessment argument,

⁶Or just to $H(CU)$, if no history overlaps with both CU and CA . I will disregard this possibility in what follows.

154 despite my efforts to avoid it elsewhere. I was trying to elicit the intuition that the
 155 retrospective assessment of Jake's prediction as true was a natural one – something
 156 no ordinary person would reject. And in ordinary speech, truth and falsity are almost
 157 invariably predicated of *propositions*.” The problem this poses is as follows:

158 [S]upervaluationism gives the “wrong” retrospective assessments of truth for past utterances
 159 of future contingents. But if I am right that utterance truth is a technical notion that plays no
 160 important role in our ordinary thought and talk, then the supervaluationist can accept these
 161 consequences without being revisionist about our ordinary future-directed talk. What really
 162 matters is whether supervaluationism can vindicate our retrospective assessments of the
 163 truth of *propositions*.

164 MacFarlane contends that, indeed, it can. In order to see this, we need to model
 165 the ordinary language monadic truth predicate of propositions; MacFarlane proposes
 166 this definition:

15.1 (True) “True” applies to x at a point of evaluation $\langle C, h \rangle$ iff (i) x is a
 15.2 proposition, and (ii) x is true at h .
 16.7

168 MacFarlane (2008, 25) highlights what he takes to be two virtues of this definition.
 169 In the first place, it does not have an argument place for a time, so it is never true to
 170 say that a proposition is True at a time and not True at another time; MacFarlane
 171 suggests that tense indications in ordinary talk about the truth or falsity of proposi-
 172 tions (as in “what you said yesterday *was* true”) result from merely grammatical,
 173 nonsemantic requirements. Secondly, on the assumption (EXP), it implies every
 174 instance of a disquotational principle, (DIS):

16.1 (EXP) If S at C expresses x , then x is True at h iff S is true at $\langle C, h \rangle$.

16.2 (DIS) $\forall x ((x = \text{the proposition that } S) \rightarrow (\text{True}(x) \equiv S))$.

176 But now, MacFarlane claims, the supervaluationist truth absolutist that invokes
 177 (SVT) as the proper account for the metalinguistic truth predicate *can* capture
 178 Sally's *propositional* retrospective assessment in (3), that is, the determinacy
 179 intuition properly stated. Let us consider how (SVT) leads us to evaluate Sally's
 180 assertion of (4),

181 (4) Jake's assertion is True.

182 Given (SVT), (4) is true at Sally's context C_1 including m_1 iff “True” applies
 183 to the referent of “Jake's assertion” at every point $\langle C_1, h \rangle$ such that $h \in H(C_1)$.
 184 Now, according to MacFarlane (2008, 93), “‘Jake's assertion’ denotes what Jake
 185 asserted, not Jake's act of asserting it. Although the word ‘assertion’ can be used
 186 to refer either to an *act* of asserting or to the content of such an act, it is doubtful
 187 that we ever predicate truth of *acts* at all, even if they are speech acts.” Thus,
 188 given (True), (4) is true at C_1 iff what Jake asserted is true at every such $h \in$
 189 $H(C_1)$. What Jake asserted is the proposition that there would be a sea battle the
 190 day after m_0 , but the way we have described C_1 (with Sally “hanging onto the
 191 mast, deafened by the roar of the cannon”) guarantees that proposition is true at

every $h \in H(C_1)$, because, as we put it before, non-sea-battle-at- m_1 histories are ruled out from then on.⁷

Can the supervaluationist also capture the indeterminacy intuition now? What would be the result of a supervaluationist evaluation of an assertion of (4) concurrent with Jake’s assertion of (1) or just after it? There is a problem here, as MacFarlane admits; if the supervaluationist said that (5) is true, that would commit him to (6), given the disquotational principle (DIS):

- (5) What Jake just asserted – that there would be a sea battle tomorrow – is not True.
- (6) There will not be a sea battle tomorrow.

Given that, on the supervaluationist account, the utterance of (6) in Jake’s context is untrue as much as (1) is, he should also deny that (5) is true; in fact, this appears to be the diagnosis provided by (SVT) and (True). It thus seems that now the supervaluationist is unable to capture the indeterminacy intuition; as MacFarlane (2008, 97) puts it: “the semantic fact recorded in the metalanguage by the observation that neither [(6)] nor its negation is true at such a context is *ineffable* from the ‘internal’ point of view. To express it, one must deploy the semanticist’s technical notions of utterance truth or sentence truth relative to a context.” To deal with the difficulty this poses, MacFarlane makes a proposal to the supervaluationist. The proposal is to introduce a “determinate truth” predicate:

- (Det) “DefTrue” applies to x at a point of evaluation $\langle C, h \rangle$ iff (i) x is a proposition, and (ii) x is true at every history $h \in H(C)$.

⁷ On behalf of what she describes as “traditional semantics” – which she characterizes by its not countenancing relativizations to context of assessments, nor therefore MacFarlane’s “very radical view” rejecting “the assumption of standard semantics that sentence truth is relative only to a context of use,” Brogaard (2008, 329) accepts MacFarlane’s suggestion for traditionalists to account for the determinacy and indeterminacy intuitions, in contrast to what I will later suggest they should do. She rejects instead MacFarlane’s contention that traditional, supervaluationist semantics cannot capture those intuitions when it comes to the evaluation of linguistic items. She argues that even on the traditional assumptions, the following counts as true, uttered by Sally to Jake: “The sentence ‘There will be a sea battle tomorrow,’ as uttered by you yesterday, was true at the time of utterance.” To show that she contends that the mentioned sentence is not merely mentioned but also used and resorts to Recanati’s proposal concerning such *mixed* or *open quotation* cases. The essential feature of the idea is that, while indexicals such as *tense* or “tomorrow” in the mentioned sentence obtain their value from the implied context (Jake’s) in which it was uttered, in order to obtain the ascribed proposition, the worlds/histories at which it is supposed to be evaluated are rather provided by the context of the ascription (Sally’s). In this way, we obtain the same effect as with MacFarlane’s proposal concerning evaluations of propositions as True or otherwise. Thus, Brogaard and I argue for the same claim, that the issues concerning relativism do not depend on whether sentences or propositions are truth bearers. Of course, for the reasons I will provide in the third section, I think that the way Brogaard’s proposal manages to show this gives the game away to the relativist, much as MacFarlane’s does.

213 Thus, as MacFarlane (2008, 97) says, using this predicate “our speakers can correctly
214 characterize propositions whose truth is still unsettled as ‘not Determinately True’.”

215 I’d like to consign here, for later use, what I take to be a small oversight in
216 MacFarlane’s description of the status of this suggestion. He motivates the proposal as
217 one useful “for those supervaluationists who *do* think that a proof of unsettledness
218 should compel withdrawal of an assertion about the future” (as we have seen, they
219 cannot demand this by using “True”). I find this way of motivating the proposal slightly
220 inadequate, in the context of the present dialectics. The reason is this. The problem with
221 the (2003) argument was held to be that the open future argument for relativism is
222 based on intuitions we have, which any proper account should capture; our intuitions
223 concern the evaluation of the truth of propositions, but when we consider an acceptable
224 account of such intuitions, it turns out that the supervaluationist can capture one of
225 them, the determinacy intuition. Now, if all of this is right, any proper account should
226 *also* capture the indeterminacy intuition; hence, the supervaluationist who allegedly
227 can capture the determinacy intuition must be shown to be equally able to capture it
228 as well. Unfortunately, this, as we have seen, cannot be done *in the very same terms*
229 invoked to account for the determinacy intuition. So I take it that MacFarlane’s sugges-
230 tion of introducing a “determinate truth predicate” is not merely intended, in the
231 context of this dialectics, to help those who demand withdrawal of unsettled claims in
232 the object-language but motivated first and foremost by the need to allow the super-
233 valuationist to capture also the indeterminacy intuition *somehow*.

234 In fact, this is what MacFarlane’s (2008, 98) concluding remark on the matter
235 roughly acknowledges: “It now appears that [...] the supervaluationist *can* account
236 for the asymmetry between contemporary and retrospective assessments of contingent
237 claims about the future. She can acknowledge that I can now truly assert ‘What I said
238 was true’, even though I couldn’t truly assert this yesterday. And she can acknowl-
239 edge that I can now truly assert ‘What I said was determinately true’, even though
240 yesterday I could have truly asserted ‘What I just said is not determinately true’.”
241 The slight inaccuracy I am complaining about here consists in not making sufficiently
242 explicit that, in fact, the proposal for the supervaluationist to capture the intuitions
243 is not entirely convincing. To capture the determinacy intuition, he appeals to an
244 object-language disquotational truth predicate of propositions, modeled by “True.”
245 But this cannot capture as well the indeterminacy intuition; to the extent that we
246 ordinary speakers have it, the supervaluationist must say, it is either because we are
247 deploying a unique ordinary truth predicate modeled by “True,” and then we are
248 confused, or it is because we have it with respect to a different truth predicate
249 (a nondisquotational one), and then we are also confused, this time by our not real-
250 izing that we are deploying two different (even if related) truth notions, one disquo-
251 tational, the other not.

252 I will come back to this point later when we are in a better position to evaluate
253 the full package of pros and cons concerning the proposals at stake, including the
254 one that MacFarlane makes on behalf of the supervaluationist. But before we come
255 to that, I want to present and critically examine the new argument he thinks he has
256 for relativism against the allegedly enlightened supervaluationist whose views we
257 have just characterized.

MacFarlane’s New Argument for Truth Relativism

258

In the framework we are using, the usual semantics for “actually” goes as follows: 259

- (Act)_↑ ‘Actually: ϕ ’ is true at a point of evaluation $\langle C, h \rangle$ iff ϕ is true at $\langle C, h_c \rangle$, where h_c is the world/history including the context C .
 - t8.1
 - t8.2
 - t8.3

As MacFarlane (2008, 98) notes on this definition, the operator satisfies an intuitively mandatory requirement of *initial redundancy*, which he proposes to state as (IR): 261-262

- (IR) An operator $*$ is initially redundant just in case for all S and C , S is true at C iff ‘ $*S$ ’ is true at C .
 - t9.1
 - t9.2

Now, in a branching framework, there is not just one world/history overlapping the context. Given this, MacFarlane suggests that in order to respect (IR), the supervaluationist should define “actually” as follows: 264-266

- (Act)_s ‘Actually: ϕ ’ is true at a point of evaluation $\langle C, h \rangle$ iff ϕ is true at $\langle C, h' \rangle$ for every $h' \in H(C)$.
 - t10.1
 - t10.2

In contrast, the relativist would offer the following definition: 268

- (Act)_R ‘Actually: ϕ ’ is true at a point of evaluation $\langle C_U, C_A, h \rangle$ iff ϕ is true at $\langle C_U, C_A, h' \rangle$ for every $h' \in H(C_U) \cap H(C_A)$.
 - t11.1
 - t11.2

We have seen in the previous section how the supervaluationist can somehow mimic the relativist account of the indeterminacy and determinacy intuitions when it comes to claims such as (1), once he turns to truth evaluations of propositions in the object-language. Compare now what supervaluationism has to say about an alternative utterance of (7) in the context of (1): 270-274

- (7) There will actually be a sea battle tomorrow. 275

On the one hand, it appears that we have exactly the same indeterminacy and determinacy intuitions with respect to, respectively, contemporary and retrospective evaluations of the two assertions. And on the other, in the presence of (Act)_s, the combination of (SVT) and (True) will not now allow the supervaluationist to capture the determinacy intuition regarding the retrospective evaluation today of the assertion of (7) yesterday: when evaluated today, in the middle of the sea battle, the claim made with (7) is as much unTrue as it was when evaluated yesterday, after it was made; because in both cases, given (Act)_s, we are supposed to consider all histories overlapping the context at m_0 , when the claim was made. 276-285

Before moving on to compare this result with the relativist proposal, I would like to highlight at this point one more small oversight in MacFarlane’s presentation of the supervaluationist he characterizes, which adds to the one pointed out at the end of the previous section. It is not just that such supervaluationism counts an assertion of (7) as unTrue, both in contemporary and retrospective evaluations; in fact, it 286-290

291 counts it as False, and as DetFalse as well. For the semantics for “Actually” in (Act_s)
 292 makes it a settledness operator, an operator of historical necessity; hence, it is not
 293 just that the supervaluationist that MacFarlane envisages treats assertions of (7) and
 294 (1) asymmetrically, in that it cannot capture the retrospective determinacy intuition
 295 regarding the former while it allegedly can, regarding the latter. The view is totally
 296 unable to capture the indeterminacy intuition regarding contemporary evaluations
 297 of (7), not even in the peculiar way allowed to capture it regarding (1) discussed in
 298 the previous section.

299 This leads us to appreciate the second small oversight in MacFarlane’s presenta-
 300 tion. We can now see that, even though – as MacFarlane (personal communication)
 301 pointed out to me – “Actually” as defined by (Act_s) does meet (IR) (for that only
 302 requires that *S* and **S* are each true in a context if the other is), it does not meet
 303 what I take to be the intuitive idea of *initial redundancy*, which, in the present non-
 304 bivalent framework, should rather be that *S* and **S* must have *the same semantic*
 305 *value* in every context: true, false, or neither true nor false. To justify the intuitive-
 306 ness of (IR), MacFarlane (2008, 98) says:

307 This is not because “actually” has no effect on truth conditions, but because of a delicate rela-
 308 tion between the semantics for “actually” and the definition of sentence truth at a context. The
 309 effect of adding an actuality operator to the *front* of a sentence is to shift the world of evalua-
 310 tion to the world of *C*. This has an effect on the sentence’s truth-at-points profile, but not on
 311 its truth-at-contexts profile, because (in standard, nonbranching frameworks) a sentence is
 312 true at a context *C* just in case it is true at the point $\langle C, wC \rangle$, where wC = the world of *C*.

313 Should these considerations not be extended to all truth values? If not, why not?
 314 In stating (IR) the way he does, and in not mentioning the fact that the supervalua-
 315 tionism he is describing counts as neither true nor false utterances of (1) but false
 316 those of (7) (and unTrue what (1) says, while False what (7) says, when contempo-
 317 rarily evaluated), MacFarlane (2008) overlooks a second, important peculiarity of
 318 the position he has construed as his target in that work⁸.

319 Let us go back now to the exposition of MacFarlane’s new argument. No discrepancy
 320 between our theoretical account of the intuitions concerning (1) and (7) is obtained
 321 when we use the relativist definition (Act_r), which makes the semantic value of
 322 “Actually” dependent not only on the context of utterance but also on the context of
 323 assessment. MacFarlane (2008, 101) concludes, “I think the relativist’s view accords
 324 better with common sense.” Is this so? Although, as I announced above and
 325 will explain in detail in the next section, this is a purely theoretical exercise,⁹ it is
 326 still useful to see that MacFarlane’s “Actuality” argument is not very compelling.
 327 Even if purely theoretical, the exercise of running through the reasons why this is
 328 so is, I think, convenient, for it will help us appreciate how subtle and complex
 329 the issues are and the extent to which appeals to intuitions on these matters pose
 330 delicate problems.

⁸ Dietz & Murzi (forthcoming) make related points, cf. fn. 20 and surrounding text.

⁹ For, to reiterate, I do not think any serious truth absolutist who adopts supervaluationism as a means for capturing his preferred option (among the two that the facts of the open future leave to truth absolutist, to wit: capturing the contemporary indeterminacy intuition, or rather the retrospective determinacy intuition) should accept MacFarlane’s offer.

As Lewis (1983, 19, see also postscript B) points out, “actual” is ambiguous between the *rigid* sense captured by (Act) and a *shifty* sense, which (8) and (9) illustrate:¹⁰

- (8) If Max ate less, he would actually enjoy himself more. 333
- (9) The following is contingent: in the actual world, Cæsar is murdered. 334

The shifty sense is captured by the following definition: 335

(Act_{sh}) \lceil Actually: ϕ \rceil is true at a point of evaluation $\langle C, h \rangle$ iff ϕ is true at $\langle C, h \rangle$. t12.1
 336²

In the shifty sense, “actual” also satisfies (IR), of course, because it is in fact an operator redundant *everywhere*, not just initially: it is just a particle used perhaps for rhetorical emphasis and such things. Concerning it, MacFarlane (2008, 99) concedes: “It may be that there is a use of ‘actually’ in English that behaves this way [...] but we’re after an operator that makes a difference in embedded contexts.” We may be after it, but the presence of the shifty sense in natural language allows MacFarlane’s contender an easy reply: to the extent that we do have indeterminacy and determinacy intuitions regarding (7), they can be explained in that we are assuming the shifty sense of the operator.¹¹

MacFarlane does consider more complex examples, such as (10), for which this explanation would not work¹²:

- (10) Today it is still possible that the weather tomorrow will be different than it actually will be. 348
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Here “actually” occurs embedded inside an operator of historical possibility; these are the kinds of occurrence that evince the difference between the shifty, everywhere redundant, sense, and the rigid sense. If we consider that the shifty sense (10) is obviously false, no matter when we evaluate it, this is because it just comes to asserting the possibility of a contradiction: today, it is still possible that the weather tomorrow will be different from what it will be. With respect to the rigid sense, if the weather today was indeterminate yesterday – when (10) was asserted – both the supervaluationist and the relativist would count what it says as unTrue, in fact as False, if assessed concurrently with the utterance. However, when it comes to retrospective assessments today, while the supervaluationist has to stick to that verdict, the relativist can count what is said as True. This, then, would have to be the ultimate piece of intuitive evidence that according to MacFarlane (2008, 101) supports the relativist proposal. 350
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¹⁰ Hunter & Asher (2005, 121) provide additional nice examples: ‘If someone other than George Bush had won the election, the actual winner would have been happy’.

¹¹ Brogaard (2008, 332–4) also provides this reply to the new argument. For her, having a reply is not merely theoretical exercise, given that (as a previous footnote explains) she gladly adopts the line that MacFarlane offers to the supervaluationist. The same applies to Dietz & Murzi (forthcoming), who also provide this reply, and similarly appear to embrace MacFarlane’s “gift” to supervaluationists.

¹² Isidora Stojanovic pointed this out to me.

363 What should we make of this? I think someone who is happy to adopt the line
 364 that MacFarlane is suggesting that the supervaluationist should take can safely
 365 disregard the putative strength of this evidence.¹³ To start with, I am not sure how
 366 reliable we should take to be our intuitions regarding truth evaluations of assertions
 367 of simpler sentences such as (1) and (7) on the assumption of the open future.
 368 MacFarlane should, to a certain extent, agree with this, because as we saw, he allows
 369 for a certain shakiness when it comes to both the supervaluationist and the relativist
 370 account of the indeterminacy intuition concerning (7), in contrast with (1) – what is
 371 said by the former is counted as False, what is said by the latter, as neither True nor
 372 False. We should not assign too much importance to whatever intuitions we find
 373 ourselves having with respect to retrospective evaluations of such utterances in the
 374 presence of the open future, because it might well be that the possibility of objective
 375 indeterminism is too remote from ordinary assumptions for such intuitions to count
 376 as data in our theorizing. When it comes to (10), this skepticism is even more
 377 justified. We should not worry about being considered very irrational if we refuse to
 378 adopt MacFarlane’s variety of relativism on this most tenuous basis.

379 In any case, as I said above, this exercise was purely theoretical. We have already
 380 found compelling reasons for not taking very seriously the supervaluationist
 381 contender that MacFarlane (2008) has construed for him to oppose. We saw in the
 382 previous section how poor that supervaluationist account of the indeterminacy intu-
 383 tion was, and we have seen in this one how even more unsatisfactory the account
 384 of the same intuition is when it comes to utterances including “actually.” In the next
 385 section, I will argue that the situation is even worse: the account surrenders too
 386 much to a form of relativism that we have good reasons not to embrace.

387 **The Relativism of MacFarlane’s Supervaluationist**

388 In this section, I would like to show why, in addition to being exposed to the
 389 difficulties we have already highlighted, the supervaluationism capturing the determinacy
 390 intuition in retrospective assessments that MacFarlane’s (2008) characterizes has
 391 given up too much of its main philosophical motivation for the view to be appealing

¹³ It would be interesting to know what Brogaard (2008) thinks, but she does not discuss the more complex examples such as (10). Dietz and Murzi (forthcoming), who also appear to accept MacFarlane’s proposal for the supervaluationist to capture the determinacy intuition, do discuss (10) – cf. their section 5. Surprisingly in my view, they just contemplate the shifty sense, and hence contend that it is false. However, they are happy to accept the non-shifty, true reading of ‘yesterday it was still possible that the weather today would be different than it actually would be’. A truth-value links principle corresponding to TVL above would validate the intuition that, to the extent that this sentence has a true reading, (10) must equally have one. Dietz & Murzi appear to accept only the true, non-shifty reading of the quoted sentence for the ad hoc reason that it does not create the problem that accepting such a reading for (10) poses, given the package of views they accept: to wit, that MacFarlane’s argument at least works for a reading of (10).

to anybody. One might wonder why this is a point worth making; after all, MacFarlane should be only too happy with this result, for in articulating the proposal, he was just making things more difficult for his ultimate goals. In reply, I note first that it could be useful in order to disabuse misguided truth absolutists who might be taken in by MacFarlane's proposal.¹⁴ Secondly and more significantly, the discussion of these issues is philosophically important in itself, because it helps us clarify what is at stake in debates between truth absolutists and truth relativists. A different reason for doubting that the task on which I am about to embark is worth pursuing lies in that MacFarlane himself (2008, 97, footnote.) candidly admits that "True" is *assessment-sensitive* (in contrast with "DetTrue," which, he says, is merely *use-sensitive*). This appears to concede that it is a radical-relativist notion – which is exactly the point I want to make. However, he (p.c.; cf. also his ms, § 9.7.2, 271) now thinks that this concession was misleading. So, let us try to disentangle these issues.

Traditionally, the contents of speech acts such as assertions and mental states such as judgments and beliefs are taken to determine (or just *be*) properties of possible worlds, modeled by functions from worlds to truth values that thus supervene on them. Two different sorts of reasons are traditionally given for this. Firstly, the *operator motivation*: it allows for a natural compositional semantics for modal operators, "necessarily," "possibly," "actually," and so on. Secondly, the *content-commonalities* motivation: in this way, we capture intuitive commonalities between different acts or states, discernible in the facts that contents are intended to account for. Thus, it is natural to think that the content that speakers assert in uttering "snow is white" and that their audiences grasp is not dependent on the actual facts about the color of snow; one would be asserting or grasping the same content both if the facts were as they actually are – snow being white – or if the facts differ and snow were blue; for this is why one can sensibly purport to provide information with an utterance of "snow is white," or – on the other side of the communicative exchange – obtain information from it. But this should not mean that contents are fully unrelated to how the actual facts are, because the point of making an assertion or a judgment is to classify them as being a certain way. As Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* suggested, we validate both intuitions by taking contents to be, or at least determine, properties of possible ways for the world to be, ascribed to them in the act of asserting.¹⁵

Some proponents of relativism make life easy for themselves by taking it to be just the claim that contents have further parameters in addition to worlds, that is, that they are not just properties of worlds, modeled by functions from worlds to truth values, but properties of worlds and some additional truth determinants. One of MacFarlane's outstanding contributions to this debate is to make it clear that the "additional parameters in contents" suggestion will not do, if the goal is to

¹⁴ The already discussed Brogaard (2008) and Dietz & Murzi (forthcoming) show that this is no mere theoretical possibility.

¹⁵ I present these considerations in counterfactual terms in order to make manifest something I would have thought is obvious, but I have found sometimes contested in presentations of this material, to wit, that nothing in them requires by itself a commitment to modal realism.

430 articulate a clear formulation of something that corresponds sufficiently to the truth
431 relativist claims throughout the history of philosophy. The temporalism espoused by
432 Kaplan (1989) and the *centered worlds* account of *de se* contents propounded by Le
433 wis (1979) jointly establish that adding parameters to contents is not sufficient for
434 (genuine) truth relativism. The first is motivated by operator considerations about
435 the semantics of tense; it can also be motivated on the basis of content-commonalities
436 considerations motivating the second. However, as MacFarlane has repeatedly
437 pointed out, such nonstandard views on content do not appear to have anything to
438 do with traditional intimations for truth relativism, nor can the resulting views be
439 assimilated to the truth-relativist proposals that we would like to understand better.
440 Adding parameters is not necessary either, as the sort of relativism contemplated
441 in this paper shows: nothing other than (classes of) traditional parameters such as
442 world/histories is at stake, but the assessment sensitivity that MacFarlane advances
443 does appear to be close to traditional truth-relativist suggestions.¹⁶

444 So, what is the difference between the nonindexical contextualism (in MacFarlane's
445 terminology, which as I said, for reasons that will presently become clear, I find
446 descriptively accurate, and I am adopting here) that, for instance, Kölbel (2004) adopts
447 with respect to evaluative notions and a true form of relativism? Here, one could think,
448 the answer is easy. Nonindexical relativism follows the pattern of Kaplan's temporal-
449 ism. Temporalists relativize the truth of sentences/propositions to points of evaluation
450 consisting of worlds and times; sentences are uttered and propositions are used in
451 *contexts of utterance/use*,¹⁷ and then their truth value is settled, absolutely, by fixing
452 the parameters with values given by such contexts: the world and time of the context
453 of utterance/use. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, when-following nonindexical
454 contextualist proposals-we include standards of value, judges, or moral codes as fur-
455 ther parameters in the characterization of contents. True relativists, by contrast, posit
456 in addition a *context of assessment* and take the value for some parameters as fixed by
457 it – as we have seen MacFarlane suggesting earlier, with the relevant parameter in the
458 open future case being the class of histories overlapping a given context.

459 However, I do not think this is enough to fully appraise what is going on, for
460 “parameters fixed by the context of utterance/assessment” is a theoretical notion.
461 Let me invoke an analogy at this point. I assume that, in order to properly understand
462 and appraise the differences between Newtonian and relativistic dynamics, it is not
463 enough to grasp their theoretical apparatus; one must also have a grasp of (1) the
464 facts those theories purport to account for (the behavior of heavenly bodies, tides,
465 harmonic oscillators, or what have you) *described independently* of the theoretical

¹⁶ A clear presentation of these points can be found in Chapter 3 of MacFarlane (ms). See also MacFarlane (2005), 307–9.

¹⁷ Concerning the notion of *use of a proposition*, which will play a crucial role in what follows, MacFarlane (ms., 4.3, 97) says: “It may seem strange to talk of a proposition being true at a context of use, because a proposition is not ‘used’ in the way that a sentence is. But [...] in an extended sense, we can think of assertions or beliefs as ‘uses’ of the propositions asserted or believed.”

apparatus and (2) how exactly both theories explain them by deploying their distinctive theoretical notions. Similarly, in our case, it is not enough to have a conception of the theoretical metalinguistic relative notions of truth that each theory invokes; we must have an independent grasp of the facts that they purport to account for and fully grasp how the theories deploy their theoretical notions in accounting for them. For it might well be that, at the end of the day, the proposals are only notational variants of each other. Or the other way around, it may be that one can state a truly relativist proposal in the theoretical terminology of nonindexical contextualism. This is no mere abstract possibility, as we will see later with an actual example provided by Egan (2010).

So, to pose again the question, what does the difference between relativism and nonindexical contextualism come to, in terms of their respective accounts of pretheoretical data? The difference must lie at the point where the semantics interacts with the uses to which language is put, which is what we have sufficiently clear intuitions about that can be taken to antedate theoretical proposals like the ones we are canvassing. In particular, we use propositions/utter sentences with given semantic contents to make assertions, and we invoke *truth* in what we might call its *normative role* to evaluate such acts.¹⁸ An ascertainable difference concerning this intuitive normative role that we give to the truth predicate results from the fact that nonindexical contextualism relativizes its theoretical truth predicate merely to contexts of *utterance* – as of course, the truth absolutist (indexical) contextualist does – while true relativism does this with respect to contexts of *assessment* as well.

In general, *there is* in fact a clear pretheoretical difference between the nonindexical contextualist's and truth absolutist's "parameters set by the context of utterance" and the corresponding relativist's "parameters set by the context of assessment," which MacFarlane has come to emphasize of late. As we saw, he takes contexts of assessment to be, ontologically, the same kind of thing as contexts of use, the difference between calling them "of use" or "of assessment" having to do with the two different uses to which they can be put in semantic explanations that we are trying to be clear about. Now, in recent work, MacFarlane (ms., 3.2.3, 78) has pointed out a pretheoretical distinguishing mark, to wit, that "the context of assessment is not fixed in any way by facts about the context of use, including the speaker's intentions; there is no 'correct' context from which to assess a particular speech act." This is helpful. As is well known, for many indexicals, we cannot appeal to *objective* features of the context in which they are used to determine their value, even on traditional assumptions.¹⁹ Thus, "here" usually refers to the physical place where the use occurs, but it also has "demonstrative" uses, in which it refers, say, to a place indicated by pointing to a

¹⁸ The truth of sentences/propositions also plays a nonnormative role in evaluating the contents of sentences also when they occur embedded and thus nonasserted, for instance, in order to account for the semantics of truth-functional operators such as "or" and "if ... then."

¹⁹ In part, because of this, I prefer Stalnaker's (1978) notion of context as a "presupposition set," but for present purposes, we can go along with MacFarlane's choice.

503 map, and even in the more usual case in which it refers to the location of use, the
 504 extent of that location is only determined by the demonstrative intentions of the
 505 speaker.²⁰ Hence, there are no easy objective pretheoretical features that allow us to
 506 distinguish semantic accounts that allow parameters to be fixed only by contexts of
 507 use, from others that allow context of assessments to play this role. What fixes the
 508 referent of “here,” in general, is not the physical place at which the utterance/use
 509 occurs but the directing intentions of the speaker; thus, what counts as *the place of*
 510 *the context of utterance* for that purpose might well be as far away in space and time
 511 as “contexts of assessment” typically are.

512 If, however, parameters that are clearly *not intended* by the speaker can play a
 513 “context of assessment” role vis-à-vis the normative role of the concept of truth,
 514 then this does produce a pretheoretical difference that can help show that nonindexical
 515 contextualism and relativism are not just notational variants. Unfortunately,
 516 however, it is not clear at all that we can apply this criterion in the open future case.
 517 For there is a time manifestly relevant for the evaluation of a statement about the
 518 future to minimally reflective speakers, namely, the time – referentially or generically
 519 indicated in the content of the utterance, depending on the correct semantics of
 520 tense – at which matters are settled one way or the other. Thus, it might well be that
 521 speakers do *intend* (when aware of the possibility of the open future) the histories
 522 open at that time to be the only ones relevant to evaluate their claims; in fact, some-
 523 thing like this “thin red line” proposal will be the best option I will suggest in the
 524 final section in order to deal with the open future.²¹

525 Now, MacFarlane would no doubt point out that, if we did so, we would not have
 526 the indeterminacy intuition, only the determinacy intuition. Still, the nonindexical
 527 contextualist could take the situation to be analogous to that involving the sort of
 528 data (about answering machines, billboards, and so on) discussed in Egan (2009) –
 529 say, “Jesus loves *you*,” said by the televangelist to his audience, intending different
 530 singular claims, not a collective one, or the undercover cop infiltrating the bank
 531 heist ring uttering, both for the benefit of the gangsters in the room and his fellow
 532 officers in the surveillance van, “Everything is going just as *we* planned.” These
 533 cases are in my view accurately described by saying that the speaker intends in fact
 534 different *claims* or *assertions* by uttering a single sentence. In the open future case,
 535 one would be an assertion *concerning* – using Perry’s (1986) terminology –²² classes
 536 of histories open at the time of the assertion (which would account for the indeter-
 537 minacy intuition) and another one concerning classes open after the relevant time in
 538 the future (which would account for the determinacy intuition). We cannot thus

²⁰ In my own view, this applies to all indexicals, including also “I”; think of Neo in *Matrix* using “I” to refer not to his real scruffy self but to his glossy virtual avatar in the matrix. When the global behavior of indexicals and demonstratives is taken into consideration, I do not see any good reason to consider these cases as any more “pragmatic” than the demonstrative or anaphoric uses of “here” and “now.”

²¹ For the concept of the *Thin Red Line*, cf. Belnap et al. (2001), 135 ss.

²² In Perry’s terminology, the assertion is not *about* it – otherwise, it would be a purely *indexical contextualist* view, as opposed to a nonindexical contextualist proposal.

distinguish nonindexical contextualism from relativism in these terms, because it cannot be ruled out that reflective speakers with the open future in mind might *intend* the different relevant classes of histories, and for reasons we pointed out at the end of the previous section, the intuitions of unreflective speakers are of doubtful relevance.

MacFarlane has been concerned with this problem since his (2003) paper. Aside from the point that contexts of assessment need not be intended, which cannot be of use when the predicament concerns the present case, his approach to it has been to consider the consequences of the different semantic proposals for theories of assertion.²³ In previous work (2003, 332–6; 2005, 318–22), he considered consequences relative to a conception of assertion in terms of different commitments that asserters incur. In more recent work (ms., Ch. 5), he has extended the range covered by considering alternative accounts of assertion. Here, I will follow the proposals in the latter work concerning accounts of assertion in terms of constitutive rules. This is in part because I think that these approaches are more on the right track (asserters do incur commitments, but only, I think, as a result of subjecting their acts to the rules constitutive of assertion), and also because it helps to make the essential points clearer.

On the constitutive rules approach, what I called the normative role that we give to our truth evaluations is predicated on the constitutively normative nature of the act of assertion.²⁴ Williamson (1996/2000) claims that the following norm (the *knowledge rule*) is constitutive of assertion and individuates it:

(KR) One must ((assert *p*) only if one knows *p*). 113, 1561

In the course of the debate that Williamson’s proposal has generated, other writers have accepted the view that assertion is defined by constitutive rules but have proposed alternative norms; thus, Weiner (2005) proposes a *truth* rule, (TR):

(TR) One must ((assert *p*) only if *p*). 114, 1565

MacFarlane (ms, 5.2) takes (TR) to be a more plausible candidate than (KR) and assumes it in his discussion; I will follow suit for, again, I do not think anything of substance for the present purposes hinges on it.

To recap, we have on the table two contenders with allegedly different views. Firstly, the relativist proposal presented in previous sections for utterances of “There is a sea battle tomorrow,” or the corresponding proposition, which relativizes their

²³ Presumably, the differences between the semantics should also transpire with respect to other speech acts, such as promises, orders, or questions; in order to settle these debates, it might be useful to explore the matter from that perspective.

²⁴ It might well be that assertion is not *constitutively* normative. On the expressive Gricean account in Bach and Harnish (1979), assertion is constituted by specific communicative intentions of speakers; norms of assertion are *regulative*, deriving from other norms such as moral sincerity rules as in Hindriks (2007). I agree with MacFarlane (ms, 5.4.2) that these accounts are not correct, but for distinguishing indexical contextualist, nonindexical contextualist, and relativist proposals, a regulative norms approach would be equally serviceable.

572 truth to classes of histories overlapping contexts of assessment; secondly, nonin-
 573 dexical contextualist analogues of Kaplanian temporalism applied to the open
 574 future, in particular the version outlined a few paragraphs back, which interprets
 575 Jake's utterance of (1) as the making of two assertions with the same content that
 576 concerns different classes of histories.²⁵ How do they differ, in pretheoretical terms,
 577 when it comes to appraising the extent to which the obligations constitutive of asser-
 578 tions are met?

579 In order to evaluate these obligations, the values of the open parameters have
 580 somehow to be fixed. The temporalist will fix them relative to the context of utter-
 581 ance of the sentence/use of the proposition. Thus, to evaluate whether a speaker who
 582 makes an assertion by uttering "It is raining in Barcelona" meets the obligation
 583 imposed by (TR), we should consider the world and time of the context of the asser-
 584 tion. What about the relativist? MacFarlane (ms, 5.2, 129) notes: "It makes sense to
 585 privilege the context the asserter occupies when she makes the assertion as the one
 586 relative to which she should assert only truths." But, if so, he rightly concludes, we
 587 will be left without any difference in the pretheoretical terms we are looking for
 588 between the nonindexical contextualist and relativist proposals, for the latter will
 589 take *the context of utterance/use* as the privileged context of assessment for applying
 590 (TR) and thus will assign the same value to the relevant parameter as the former.²⁶

591 Hence, just by appealing to how the obligation imposed by (TR) is met, we cannot
 592 appreciate any difference for pretheoretical appraisal between the nonindexical
 593 contextualist proposals and relativist ones. In order to distinguish them, MacFarlane
 594 (ms, 5.3, 134) appeals at this crucial point to another speech act, *retraction*.
 595 "By 'retraction', I mean the speech act one performs in saying 'I take that back' or
 596 'I retract that'. The target of a retraction is another speech act, which may be an
 597 assertion, a question, a command, an offer, or a speech act of another kind. [...]
 598 The effect of retracting a speech act is to 'undo' the normative changes effected by
 599 the original speech act. So, for example, in retracting a question, one releases the
 600 audience from an obligation to answer it, and in retracting an offer, one withdraws
 601 a permission that one has extended. Similarly, in retracting an assertion, one dis-
 602 avows the assertoric commitment undertaken in the original assertion."

603 The suggestion is that the pragmatic difference between absolutist and relativist
 604 semantics manifests itself in *norms for retraction*. While, as we have seen, at the
 605 level of the obligations imposed by (TR), there is no difference between a nonin-
 606 dexical contextualist proposal such as temporalism and a relativist one, we do find
 607 such a difference when it comes to *obligations to retract*. By contending in our
 608 semantics that the truth of an utterance of a sentence/use of a proposition depends

²⁵ This is the version I take to be more adequate for nonindexical contextualists to deal with the open future, although of course there are others; the nonindexical contextualist can also enlist in his own framework the form of contextualism I will finally propose, taking future contingents to make just one claim that concerns the histories overlapping the intended time in the future when the indeterminacy is resolved.

²⁶ Cf. MacFarlane (ms, 5.2, 127–133); the discussion here follows the course of the one in MacFarlane (2005, 314–317), although the latter work does not contemplate the "constitutive norms" account of assertion I am focusing on here.

on a parameter fixed at contexts of assessment, we are theoretically committing ourselves to the contention *that the utterance or use should be retracted or otherwise, depending on the values of those parameters at contexts of assessment other than the context of utterance*. We are under no such obligation if, as in nonindexical contextualist proposals, the parameter is fixed at the context of utterance.

To illustrate, consider again the Kaplanian temporalist account of “It is raining in Barcelona,” and let us compare it with a corresponding relativist account, which says that the relevant time is given by *contexts of assessment*. I utter the sentence at a time when it is raining in Barcelona. Consider a later time, when it is sunny in Barcelona. The pragmatic effect of the relativist proposal manifests itself in that at that time *I should retract the previous assertion*, in contrast with the nonindexical contextualist account, on which I am under no such obligation. Of course, as MacFarlane (ms, 3.1, 67) grants, a relativist proposal of this kind applied to this case “would be silly,” but the important point is that it is indeed a relativist proposal, discernible from the nonindexical contextualist proposal in the pretheoretical terms we were looking for: this is precisely why we can consider it silly, unlike the Kaplanian temporalist account.

Let us thus consider how to apply the suggestion to the open future. A possible analogue of temporalism suggested above is the view on which the utterer of (1) makes in fact two assertions, with a common content; the difference between the two being – in Perry’s (1986) terminology – that one *concerns* the class of histories open at the time when the utterance takes place, while the other concerns the future time when the matter is settled one way or the other. The relativist proposal for applying (TR) presented above will not describe the situation as one involving two different assertions. Following MacFarlane’s remarks, we assume that the privileged context of assessment for applying the truth rule gives us the class of histories overlapping the time at which the utterance is made, thus accounting for the indeterminacy intuition. Consider now the class given by the time at which the matter is settled. This is, in the relativist characterization, another context of assessment for the same assertion. The pragmatic import that this has is that now the speaker is obliged to retract his previous assertion if it turns out to be false with respect to the set of histories then open. On the nonindexical contextualist proposal, however, that class only identifies which circumstance concerns *a different assertion* that Jake intended at the same time, using the same words. Its evaluation should be irrelevant to the evaluation of the other, as is the case in the examples that we took as our model, say, the undercover cop infiltrating the bank heist ring uttering “Everything is going just as we planned.” If it turns out that the assertion is false when “we” refers to the group including the utterer and his fellow policemen, this should not have any normative effect such as an obligation to retract the assertion made when “we” refers to the group including the speaker and his “fellow” gangsters.

In the open future case, unlike the temporalist example above, intuitively, perhaps the difference favors the relativist account, but we can put this issue aside at this point.²⁷ What matters for us now is that here, at last, we have a sufficiently clear

²⁷I reserve the final, all-things-considered appraisal for the last section.

652 pretheoretical, pragmatic difference between truth absolutist proposals, including
 653 so-called “relativist” proposals that simply add further parameters to contents
 654 (MacFarlane’s *nonindexical contextualism*) and genuinely relativist proposals.

655 To hammer home this result, we will see how it also fits Egan’s account of predicates
 656 of taste, a view that (1) assumes a different account of assertion and (2) uses the
 657 theoretical apparatus of nonindexical contextualism, without mentioning “contexts
 658 of assessment.”²⁸ Egan’s account (2010, 276–7) is based on Lewis’s (1979) theory
 659 of *de se* contents as self-attributed properties, which Egan takes to be motivated
 660 by content-commonalities considerations: “There’s a certain doxastic similarity
 661 between all of the well-informed people with burning pants, and a certain conative
 662 similarity between all of the kids who want to grow up to be firefighters. One way
 663 to capture these similarities is to say that there’s some potential object of proposi-
 664 tional attitudes that all of the well-informed people with burning pants believe,
 665 and some potential object of propositional attitudes that all of the kids who want to
 666 grow up to be firefighters desire.” Egan realizes that just positing contents of this
 667 sort does not suffice for a truly relativist proposal, for it could just be a form of
 668 nonindexical contextualism. We need a story about how it affects assertions. Here
 669 he appeals to Stalnaker’s (1978) account, on which assertions are proposals to
 670 update the context, understood as a set of presupposed contents: “It’s absolutely
 671 crucial to making this sort of story work that we take the relation between content
 672 and assertion to be [...] one [...] according to which the essential effect of an assertion
 673 with content P is that cooperative and credulous audience members *come to accept*
 674 *P*. (Which means, in the case of assertions whose content is some property P, that
 675 cooperative and credulous audience members come to self-attribute – i.e., take
 676 *themselves* to have – P.)”

677 We saw before how MacFarlane (*ms*, 3.1, 67) proposes to transform the tempo-
 678 ralist proposal into one that is truly relativist by his lights – concluding that it “would
 679 be silly” but also that this very appraisal proves that he has shown how his relativism
 680 differs from the original nonindexical contextualist nonsilly proposal. Similarly,
 681 Egan (2010, 278) points out that to apply his account to the original cases that motivate
 682 the Lewisian view of contents would be silly: “This, incidentally, shows why the
 683 very first place in which one might be inclined to look for self-locating content in
 684 natural languages – sentences involving first-person indexicals – isn’t in fact a
 685 very good place to look.” Indeed, it would be silly for me to update the conversa-
 686 tional score with the *de se* content of “My pants are on fire” after your utterance of

²⁸ Egan’s work is also interesting because he carefully formulates the sort of contextualist proposal I tend to find preferable in all cases that have been suggested so far. In the case of predicates such as “tasty,” the idea is that it applies to an object just in case it has a disposition to cause certain experiences, which would be manifested under certain idealized conditions; we apply those predicates under more or less general presuppositions of commonality in the conditions for manifestation of the disposition, and usually assuming also conative attitudes pressing for those commonalities to exist, or to create them when they do not. Egan (2010, §5) rejects this sort of view on the basis of concerns that his own previous careful formulation should help to dispel. Cf. López de Sa (2008), García-Carpintero (2008), and Schaffer (2011).

that sentence. But the fact that we can make this judgment shows that we understand how Egan's proposal differs from a nonindexical contextualist one: in Egan's terms, the nonindexical contextualist does not allow for updating the conversational presuppositional set when the contents he favors are asserted, for, on that view, the relevant claims concern merely *the circumstances of the asserter* (in the case of *de se* contents, his own properties, in the temporalist case, the time of the utterance); it would be silly to update the score when, as is typically the case, the relevant circumstances might have changed. Egan's claim is that this updating would not be at all silly in the case of contents involving predicates of taste but in fact the best account of the case.²⁹

Once again, the evaluation of the proposal does not matter for present purposes. What matters is that we can see a difference between truth absolutists and relativists discernible in pretheoretical pragmatic terms, this time invoking Stalnaker's account of assertion. On this way of looking at things, the difference between the double-assertion nonindexical contextualist account given before, and the relativist one, amounts to the following: On the first view, two fully independent proposals for updating the context set are made; whether or not it is legitimate to update with respect to one is independent of whether or not it is with respect to the other. On the latter view, that is not so; if we have updated the context set today when someone utters "It will be sunny tomorrow," we are forced to revise this tomorrow when it rains.³⁰

In sum, we have found a substantive way to distinguish absolutist from truly relativist theoretical proposals. The difference does not depend on whether in their

²⁹ Egan's (2010) argumentative strategy is thus slightly peculiar: he bases his theoretical proposal on a semantic story justified on the basis of cases (those allegedly motivating *de se* and *de nunc* contents) to which applying the full view he advances would be absurd. In a previous article discussing epistemic modals (Egan 2007), though, he does discuss the conditions for the Stalnakerian assertion of *de se* contents to be legitimate. The requirement he poses is one of (presupposed) similarity in the relevant parameter. If I am my only audience, it makes sense to update the context set with my own assertions/judgments of *de se* contents. Similarly, if we are asserting *de nunc* contents concerning sufficiently lasting time intervals, it makes sense to update the context set with those asserted contents throughout the relevant interval. Egan (2007) provides a similar rationale for updating *de se*-like contents expressed by epistemic modals. Correspondingly, in the case of disputes of taste, Egan (2010) argues that they are nondefective (roughly) when presuppositions of similarity *vis-à-vis* the relevant standards are in place. This makes it at the very least very difficult to distinguish it in the pretheoretical terms we have been seeking for future contingents in this chapter from the contextualist-presuppositionalist view outlined in the previous note. Egan (2010, 282) contends that the contextualist and relativist proposals can be intuitively resolved in favor of the relativist tale, but I do not think he is right; in my own view, the semantically relevant folks' intuitions simply betray absolutist assumptions at odds with relativism, indexical or otherwise. I leave this for elaboration in future work. Torre (2010) criticizes Egan's account and provides an alternative proposal.

³⁰ However, to show that Egan's story makes sense with respect to the open future, according to the suggestions outlined in the previous footnote, we should justify the presupposition of similarity in the relevant parameter (the class of histories open at different points in the "conversation"). This cannot be done in this case, under the ordinary assumptions of "branch-pruning" as time goes by; it only makes sense under nonbranching conditions.

710 theoretical apparatus they use truth relativizations concerning parameters set by
 711 what the theories call “context of assessments.” All theories relativize truth to some
 712 parameters or other; we can have relativist proposals that do not use anything more
 713 than traditional parameters, and relativizations to parameters characterized as
 714 set by a “context of assessment” might turn out, in their pragmatic application, to be
 715 nothing more than what nonrelativist proposals offer. The real difference lies in the
 716 use to which those relativizations are put, when it comes to their predictions and
 717 explanations concerning the use of language: what they say about when speakers
 718 should retract (or otherwise) their claims, what effect those claims should have on
 719 the context set, and so on.

720 So, we are now in a position to apply this result to the form of supervaluationism
 721 that MacFarlane (2008) construes as his main contender. As we saw before, he himself
 722 (2008, 97, footnote) admits that “True” is *assessment-sensitive* (in contrast with
 723 “DetTrue,” which, he says there, is merely *use-sensitive*), which could be thought to
 724 already grant the point I am trying to make. However, he has pointed out to me
 725 (p.c.; cf. also his ms, 9.7.2, 271) that this admission was misleading, and in fact, in
 726 a way it is. MacFarlane (2005, 310–11) introduces technical notions of *use* and
 727 *assessment sensitivity* that presuppose theoretical metalinguistic truth definitions
 728 for utterances of sentences and uses of propositions. A sentence/proposition is
 729 *assessment-sensitive* just in case its truth value changes with the context of assess-
 730 ment (keeping the context of use fixed); we can extend these definitions to constitu-
 731 ent terms in sentences or propositional constituents replacing “truth value” with
 732 “extension” in the previous definitions. Given this, the object-language predicate
 733 “True” can only be called “assessment-sensitive” in this technical sense when
 734 deployed in the framework of a theoretical semantic apparatus whose metalanguage
 735 truth predicate makes use of a notion of extension-dependence with respect to con-
 736 texts of assessment. Hence, *in this sense*, “True” can only be said to be assessment-
 737 sensitive when deployed in the context of a relativistic semantics, not when deployed
 738 in the context of the technically nonrelativist supervaluationist semantics. This is
 739 why the footnote is misleading; it should perhaps be read as saying that “True” is
 740 assessment-sensitive *when embedded in the relativist semantics*.³¹

741 Nevertheless, we are now in a position to appreciate that *this sense* is a rather
 742 superficial, uninteresting one. The interesting issue is whether, given the way that
 743 the object-language truth predicate is understood to operate *pragmatically* by the
 744 supervaluationist that MacFarlane construes, it behaves as truly relativist technical
 745 metalinguistic truth predicates do. And, with respect to this – the really substantive
 746 issue at stake here – the answer is, I think, clear. Let us go back again to the comparison
 747 we used before. Imagine that Jake asserts a temporalist proposition by uttering “It is
 748 raining in Barcelona” at a time when it does rain in Barcelona. If the supervaluationist

³¹ I must say that I find “misleading” a bit of an understatement to describe the footnote, if this was the intended interpretation. I think that the only plausible interpretation of the footnote for an ordinary, informed, and charitable reader, given the context in which it occurs, takes it to accept that “True” is assessment-sensitive *in the substantive sense* I am about to describe.

that MacFarlane describes evaluates “the assertion that Jake made” or “what Jake asserted” (i.e., the temporalist proposition) for truth at a later time when it is not raining in Barcelona, he will conclude, given (DIS), that such a thing is not True. However, this theorist should not sanction the appeal to this evaluation *in order to retrospectively assess the use that Jake made of that proposition*. That would be “silly,” for the very same reasons that MacFarlane describes in these terms the relativist version of the temporalist account that we considered above. But this is precisely what the supervaluationist that MacFarlane construes intends to do with the evaluation as True or otherwise in Sally’s context of the proposition that Jake asserted, on the understanding that in this case it is not at all “silly”: that evaluation is deployed to retrospectively assess *the use that Jake made of the proposition*. This is the hallmark of relativism; not, indeed, in that it invokes a relativist technical apparatus (which it does not), but in that it puts its technical apparatus to a relativist pragmatic use – which is, in my view, ultimately what philosophically matters.

So, all in all, it is clear that no sensible truth absolutist should adopt MacFarlane’s suggestion. The proposal has the limitations we have observed in the previous sections: it provides an asymmetrical account of the determinacy and indeterminacy intuitions, and it assumes an account of “actual” that only meets the condition of initial redundancy in the way MacFarlane formulates it but not in other forms truer to the intuition underwriting it, and what is much worse, it accepts that our object-language truth predicate behaves as a relativist predicate, in the sense that is the hallmark of contemporary truth-relativist proposals; assertions made relative to a context can be evaluated for their fundamental correctness relative to other context, even context unintended when the assertion was made. To adopt this account is thus to give away the game to the relativist. Hence – as we should *a priori* have expected – after all, it does not really matter whether utterances of sentences or uses of propositions are taken as fundamental truth bearers, for the present disputes. If MacFarlane (2003) had a good argument for truth relativism based on the open future taking sentences and their uses as truth bearers, he has as good an argument when we take instead propositions and their uses as primary truth bearers. Did he?

The Open Future: Truth and Indeterminate Truth

MacFarlane has thus managed to articulate in a precise way a form of relativism that we can understand and appraise, and the open future appears to make a case in its favor. Of course, a view might have these features and be not just false but even incoherent; straightforward contradictions are perfectly intelligible. Or, more to the point – given that the lynchpin between truth absolutists and relativists is pragmatic, having to do with the uses to which propositions are put in assertion and other propositional acts – it might be that the relativist conception of those acts does not make rational sense.

Evans (1985) distinguishes three forms that proposals such as temporalism could adopt. Two of them are semantic proposals to introduce further parameters

790 in the characterization of contents/propositions, without the relativist pragmatic
 791 implications that, as we have seen in the previous section, distinguish MacFarlane’s
 792 form of relativism. These are in his view coherent proposals that he nonetheless
 793 finds insufficiently motivated. I am not sure about this, but in previous work, I (2008)
 794 have argued that there might be good “content-commonalities” considerations to
 795 posit such contents, for instance, in the vagueness-related cases that Richard (2004)
 796 discusses. The third proposal that Evans considers is akin to MacFarlane’s form of
 797 relativism in its pragmatic consequences. In a short, cryptic passage, he argues that
 798 such views are incoherent. Although Percival (1994, §4) – in the most illuminating
 799 discussion I know of these matters – questions some of Evans’ pronouncements,
 800 he (§6, 208–11) ends up agreeing in finding little reason to accept “the doctrine’s
 801 consequences for the evaluation of utterances.”³²

802 I also find truth-relativist proposals ultimately incoherent. In a nutshell, the prob-
 803 lem is this. As we have seen, such proposals ultimately concern the normative role
 804 of truth and its use in the evaluation of acts such as assertions and judgments. These
 805 are, in my view, intrinsically normative entities, which to me mean that their nature
 806 is intrinsically related to what counts as rational activity. However, I cannot see how
 807 it can ever be rational to carry out activities governed by a relativist truth norm, and
 808 although it is, in principle, possible that we are foolish enough to have instituted an
 809 intrinsically irrational practice, I find it methodologically advisable not to assume
 810 that this is so.

811 MacFarlane (ms, §5.3, 135–6) acknowledges a worry of this kind: “This allows
 812 that someone who asserts that p in c_1 might be compelled to retract this assertion in
 813 a later context c_2 , even though the assertion was permissible for her to make at c_1 .
 814 (This can happen if p is true as used at and assessed from c_1 , but not true as used at
 815 c_1 and assessed from c_2 .) This may seem odd.” In reply, this is what he has to say:
 816 “Here it is important to keep in mind that withdrawing an assertion (or other speech
 817 act) is not tantamount to conceding that one was at fault in making it. Suppose
 818 one’s evidence all strongly suggests that Uncle Jack is coming to lunch, and on the
 819 strength of that evidence you assert that Uncle Jack is coming. A bit later, Aunt
 820 Sally calls to say that Uncle Jack has broken his leg. This makes it quite unlikely
 821 that he is coming, so you retract your assertion. Nonetheless, you were perfectly
 822 reasonable in making it, and cannot be criticized for having done so. Retracting it

³²For reasons that Percival’s (1994, 199–200) nuanced discussion illuminates, as Cian Dorr pointed out to me, “relativism” might be a bad term for the doctrines that MacFarlane’s calls “nonindexical contextualism” – which is one more reason for preferring that terminology. The model for those proposals is the standard relativization of truth to possible worlds. But the fact that contents have their truth relativized to worlds does not mean that truth is thereby a relative notion, in any straightforward sense. A clear case of hidden relativization is given by gradable adjectives, such as “tall.” Claims involving them are straightforwardly relative in that they ultimately involve a relation to something like a point in a scale (García-Carpintero (2008) has some discussion and references to contemporary linguistic literature). If the standard relativization of the truth of contents to possible worlds was understood in this way, truth-ascriptions would involve reference to specific worlds, and then they would be (counterintuitively) necessary. (Cp., however, Schaffer (2011, §1.2), who defends this “nonindex” view of propositions.)

is not admitting fault.” But there is an obvious asymmetry between this case and the ones that MacFarlane’s account contemplates. In this case, the act was constitutively wrong from the beginning³³; it is just that it was reasonable for the agent to think otherwise. There is nothing strange about doing what is “objectively” wrong when it was “subjectively” acceptable and thus being required to make whatever amendments we can in spite of being entitled to excuse ourselves; this is a distinction we must make wherever norms apply. What MacFarlane’s account envisages is rather that I can perform an action that is constitutively legitimate – an assertion that meets its constitutive norm – and later be obliged to take it back. One should be excused for not finding this an intelligible possibility.³⁴

So, how should we understand our claims about the future, in view of the open future? In their discussion of vagueness, McGee and McLaughlin (1995) contemplate a nonstandard form of supervaluationism, on which truth is not identified with super-truth, truth in all precisifications; super-truth is just *determinate* truth, while truth remains disquotational, and bivalence is preserved. Greenough (2008, *ms*) provides a well-grounded theory of indeterminate truth with that shape, which he applies to the case of the open future; Barnes and Cameron (2009) and Iacona (*this volume*) have a similar proposal. Although I do not find it attractive to envisage ungrounded truths in the original case of vagueness that McGee and McLaughlin discussed (which I take to be one of semantic indecision), I find it a good way to think about the open future, at least when we assume a B-series, atemporal ontology – which is what, following MacFarlane, I have been doing here. Tweedale (2004, 249) articulates the main motivation for this: “The future will decide one way or the other; it will not leave the matter undecided, although at the moment no decision has been made, so to speak. The situation differs from [...] cases of vagueness in that there it is dubious whether the conditions for full, as opposed to partial, definition will ever exist, or even could exist, but we can be reasonably certain that the future will eventually fully determine what truth value to assign to our predictions.”

This is, of course, a “Thin Red Line” proposal, asking us to abandon the indeterminacy intuition as one about truth (if we held it in the first place) but preserving it when we take it to be just one about unsettledness, not inevitability or indeterminacy. A truth absolutist adopting this proposal would not have any of the problems we pointed out before for the supervaluationist that MacFarlane (2008) takes as his opponent; in addition to dealing in the straightforward way just described with the indeterminacy and determinacy intuitions, and not making any concession to truth relativism, the proposal of course allows for a nonshifty sense of “actual” satisfying intuitively plausible forms of initial redundancy. MacFarlane (2003, 2008) suggests

³³ I assume we are evaluating a straightforward future-tense assertion, not an epistemic modal.

³⁴ Marques (*ms*) elaborates on this, arguing against the relativist contention that truth is to play a normative role vis-à-vis assertion and retraction such that a reflective and sincere speaker who makes a permissible assertion that *p* at *c1* (where *p* is true) but fails to retract at a later context *c2* (where *p* is not true) should be deemed irrational. MacFarlane’s most recent version of his forthcoming book (*ms*) has a final chapter interestingly addressing these worries, which I cannot discuss here.

860 that Thin Red Line views trade on inadequate metaphors (adopting perspectives
861 internal to a particular branch in the tree, moving in a car along the roads/branches).
862 The objection, I take it, ultimately amounts to the one raised by Williamson in the
863 case of vagueness against McGee and McLaughlin's proposal: proponents of these
864 views should distinguish between the ontological indeterminacy they posit and a
865 mere epistemological one. I cannot confront this serious issue here; I refer the inter-
866 esting reader to the works I have already mentioned.³⁵

867 Additionally, and perhaps even more worryingly, one might doubt whether the
868 tenseless B-series treelike ontological picture we have been assuming is in the end
869 adequate to capture the contrast of the openness of the future with the fixity of the
870 past (cf. Diekemper (2007), but cp. Rosenkranz (2012), §4). This is another good
871 question that I have to put aside here. Given that MacFarlane also assumed this
872 ontology, one is entitled to take for granted that the plausibility, or otherwise, of his
873 relativist proposal should not depend on it.

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