

# Assertion and relative truth

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**Abstract** An account of assertion along truth-relativistic lines is offered. The main lines of relativism about truth are laid out and the problematic features that assertion acquires in the presence of relative truth are identified. These features are the possibility of coherently formulating norms of assertion and the possibility of grounding a rational practice of assertion upon relative truth. A solution to these problems is provided by formulating norms for making and assessing assertions that employ a suitably relativized truth predicate and a perspectival notion of correctness. Two potential objections to this proposal are addressed.

**Keywords** Assessment sensitivity · Assertion · Truth norm · Evans' problem · Taste predicates

## 1 Introduction

Relativism about truth has raised expectations within the philosophy of language, with the promise of providing an account of conceptual and linguistic phenomena which

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have proved to be challenging for more traditional semantic methods.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this promising start, in the presence of a relativistic notion of truth, some concepts, such as the concept of assertion, are still not fully understood. This paper will dwell on this topic.

I'll start by laying out the main lines of relativism about truth, in order to single out the distinctive problems that an account of assertion in terms of relative truth faces, namely the possibility of coherently formulating norms of assertion and the possibility of grounding a rational practice of assertion upon relative truth. After that, I'll show how it is possible to formulate norms of assertion that allow for relative truth, and how relative truth provides an adequate ground for a rational practice of assertion. Finally, I'll consider two objections that may be raised against the proposal.

## 2 Truth relativism

Relativism about truth is the view that the correctness of certain utterances depends, partly, upon certain features of the situation from which those utterances are assessed, as opposed to the situation in which they were produced. Examples of this type of utterances are utterances made by means of sentences such as:

- (1) Apples are tasty

The idea behind truth relativism is that an assessor may assess an utterance of (1) as correct or incorrect according to her own standard of taste (and she's perfectly entitled to do so), regardless of whether apples are tasty (or not) according to the utterer's taste.

The official characterization of truth relativism will be that the correctness conditions of certain utterances are (borrowing MacFarlane's apt term) *assessment-sensitive*. Examples of domains of discourse that have received truth-relativistic treatment include taste predicates, moral and aesthetic predicates, discourse about epistemic or moral justification, epistemic modals, knowledge attributions, and future contingents, among others. I'll concentrate on taste predicates, mainly because of ease of treatment.

Before moving on, a point needs to be made regarding the notion of correctness employed in the last paragraphs. Utterances may be assessed as correct or incorrect with respect to more than one dimension. Thus, an utterance may be deemed correct because it is true, sincere, relevant, or even polite. And an utterance may be deemed incorrect because it is false, insincere, irrelevant, or even impolite. The sense of correctness relevant here is that of truth and falsity. In this sense, an utterance is correct just in case what it says is the case: an utterance of 'Snow is white' is correct just in case snow is white, an utterance of ' $2 + 4 = 6$ ' is correct just in case  $2 + 4 = 6$ , and so on. Turning to a distinction that is not all that easy to spell out in detail, but clear and familiar enough to be of use, the notion of correctness at play in this characteri-

<sup>1</sup> These phenomena include the possibility of faultless disagreements and the distinctive practices of retraction within truth-relativistic areas of discourse. For a discussion of the importance of faultless disagreement in connection with truth relativism, see, e.g., Kölbl (2003), Wright (2006), and MacFarlane (2007). For the importance of linguistic evidence concerning retraction, see MacFarlane (2011). For a criticism of these motivations, see, for example, García-Carpintero (2008).

zation is that of the objective correctness of an utterance, as opposed to its subjective correctness (i.e., as opposed to its having been made on adequate grounds).

It is possible to characterize truth relativism more perspicuously by adopting talk of propositions. Relativism about matters of taste may then be stated as the view that certain sentences (relative to a context of utterance) express taste-neutral propositions (i.e., propositions whose truth value depends upon a standard of taste, as well as a possible world and possibly other parameters), and that the standard of taste relevant to the assessment of (at least some) utterances of those sentences is provided by the situations in which those utterances are assessed. Thus, we may formulate clauses like:

- (2) The proposition expressed by ‘Apples are tasty’ in a context  $c$  is true at  $\langle w, s \rangle$  iff apples are tasty at  $w$  according to taste standard  $s$ .

(Even though we’ll consider time- and location-neutral propositions later, we need not complicate the structure of the circumstance of evaluation.) Then, we can get a firmer grip on utterance correctness in terms of propositional truth:

- (3) An utterance of a sentence  $S$  made in a context  $c$  is correct, as assessed from a context  $c'$ , iff the proposition expressed by  $S$  in  $c$  is true at  $\langle w_c, s_{c'} \rangle$ ,

where  $w_c$  is the world of  $c$  and  $s_{c'}$  is the taste standard relevant at  $c'$ .<sup>2</sup> Hence, correctness is assessment-sensitive or perspectival, in the sense that an utterance is correct or incorrect (in our favored sense) only relative to a situation of assessment, which partially determines the circumstance of evaluation at which to evaluate the proposition that the utterance expresses.

### 3 The problems of relativistic assertion

Truth is closely related to assertion. This general connection may be understood in two related ways. On the one hand, truth is the aim of assertion (or, at any rate, an important aim). That is, truth is that to which we ought to aim in making assertions. This link between truth and assertion is captured by the norm of truth for assertion, which we may state informally along the following lines:

One ought to assert only what’s true.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, truth is the yardstick we use in measuring the correctness of assertions. That is, in order to determine whether an assertion is correct or incorrect, we need to determine whether what is asserted is true or false. This connection between the truth of an assertion and its correctness can be expressed by means of another principle, which we may again state informally:

<sup>2</sup> We could have used a doubly relativized truth predicate instead, *true as used in  $c$  and as assessed from  $c'$* , as in MacFarlane (2005). This, however, would have been at most a difference in formulation, not in view.

<sup>3</sup> This connection between assertion and truth, as well as the more specific idea that assertion is governed by a truth norm, are far from being uncontroversial. Some hold that assertion bears no interesting relation to truth (MacFarlane 2005), and some hold that the norm of assertion is not to be understood in terms of truth, but rather in terms of knowledge (Williamson 2000, Ch. 11) or some other goal, such as belief or justified belief. See the essays in Brown and Cappelen (2011) for contemporary views on these issues.

An assertion is correct if and only if what's asserted is true.

(As we have remarked in the previous section, the notion of correctness at play is that of objective correctness. The idea that truth is sufficient for correctness in this sense is far less controversial than the idea that it is sufficient for correctness in a less differentiated sense that includes its having been made on adequate grounds as well.)

It is fairly clear how these features of assertion relate to each other when truth is absolute: in making an assertion, the speaker ought to say something true with respect to the context of utterance, and in determining the correctness of that assertion, an assessor must determine whether what's asserted is true or false with respect to the situation in which it was asserted.

However, once relative truth is introduced, this picture gets blurry at best. On the one hand, we no longer know whether these principles of assertion can be coherently formulated in terms of truth. On the other, we no longer know whether these principles, if they can be formulated at all, are enough to ground a rational practice of assertion.

This last point is stressed by [Evans \(1985\)](#) and [García-Carpintero \(2008\)](#). Evans claims that assessment-sensitive correctness conditions entail that relative truth cannot provide assistance in deciding what to assert and in interpreting the utterances of others: since what is correct or true with respect to the situation of utterance may be incorrect or false with respect to a situation of assessment, we would no longer know how to make correct assertions. And García-Carpintero argues that, if the correctness of our utterances were indeed beyond our control, then we wouldn't be able rationally to comply with the injunction that the practice of assertion makes upon us.

How, then, are we to understand assertion, if we consider truth to be relative?

#### 4 Relative truth and the principles of assertion

As we have remarked before, truth is thought to be an important norm of assertion. We can formulate this norm as follows:

(T) *A* ought to assert *p* only if *p* is true,

where *A* refers to the speaker. We can also formulate more rigorously the principle expressing the correctness of an assertion:

(C) An assertion that *p* made by *A* is correct if and only if it is true that *p*.

The introduction of an assessment-sensitive notion of truth changes the way in which we formulate these principles, for we need to make room for the relativization of propositional truth to a taste standard and for the introduction of an assessor's perspective. Hence, the truth norm ought to be formulated in terms of an explicitly relativized truth predicate:

(T<sub>R</sub>) At a context *c*, *A* ought to assert *p* only if *p* is true at  $\langle w_c, s_c \rangle$ .

We also have the corresponding principle linking correctness and propositional truth:

(C<sub>R</sub>) An assertion that *p* made by *A* at *c* is correct, as assessed from a context *c'*, iff *p* is true at  $\langle w_c, s_{c'} \rangle$ .

Following the relativistic insight behind (3) above, the correctness of an assertion now makes an essential reference to a situation of assessment, for the circumstance of evaluation relevant to the assessment of an assertion is partly determined by the context of assessment.

Note that, while  $(C_R)$  makes essential reference to a context of assessment,  $(T_R)$  does not. This is so because, while there is no privileged context of assessment when assessing an utterance, it makes sense to privilege a particular context when making an assertion, namely that of the asserter.<sup>4</sup> We'll explore some consequences of this in the following sections.

## 5 Evans' problem

Now, even though it is possible to formulate the principles of assertion in terms of relative truth, it is not clear whether the relativistic conception of correctness that underlies this formulation may ground a rational practice of assertion. Both [Evans \(1985\)](#) and [García-Carpintero \(2008\)](#) have argued, more or less explicitly and to varying degrees, that it cannot.

In (1985), Evans advances a problem that arises from assigning assessment-sensitive correctness conditions to utterances of a certain class. In discussing the assessment of utterances of (allegedly) time-neutral sentences such as 'Socrates is sitting', he claims that assessment-sensitive correctness conditions give rise to a concept of correctness that cannot provide assistance in deciding what to say and in interpreting the utterances of others. For suppose, indeed, that the correctness of an utterance of 'Socrates is sitting' depends upon the time of assessment. Then, that utterance may be correct when made (if Socrates is indeed sitting at that time), but may be assessed as incorrect by an assessor at a later time when Socrates is not sitting. Crucially, the speaker has no control over the way in which others will assess her utterance. Hence, it's not clear where the speaker should aim to in order to make correct assertions: even if the speaker aims to correctness according to her own circumstance, her assertion may be deemed incorrect by someone who doesn't share that circumstance. And other aims (such as correctness with respect to all potential circumstances of assessment, or with respect to some of them, etc.) are of no help either.

Moreover, according to Evans, it follows from this that, if correctness is to provide assistance at all, then it must be a once-and-for-all property of utterances. That is, if we know where to aim, this goal will be the yardstick by which to measure the correctness of the assertions we make. Briefly, if a speaker aims to correctness with respect to her own circumstance, her assertions will be correct just in case they are correct with respect to that circumstance. If she aims to correctness according to every

<sup>4</sup> This would have been so even if we had chosen a doubly relativized truth predicate, *true as used in c and as assessed from c'*, as a basis for the semantic clauses. Then  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_R)$  would have become:

$(T_R^*)$  At a context  $c$ ,  $A$  ought to assert  $p$  only if  $p$  is true as used in  $c$  and as assessed from  $c$ .

$(C_R^*)$  An assertion that  $p$  made by  $A$  at  $c$  is correct, as assessed from a context  $c'$ , iff  $p$  is true as used in  $c$  and as assessed from  $c'$ .

Note that the relativization to a context of assessment makes a difference only in the latter case.

circumstance of assessment, they will be correct just in case they are correct in every such circumstance, and so on.

Evans' remarks are indeed correct as far as utterances of sentences such as 'Socrates is sitting' are concerned. Moreover, I think that such a practice of assessment would give rise to an incoherent practice of communication. This point is quite easily appreciated with respect to another, similar case. Suppose that 'It's raining' expresses a location-neutral proposition, and that the correctness of an utterance of this sentence is indeed assessment-sensitive, that is, that it varies according to the place at which it is being assessed. Then, a speaker might correctly use it to make an assertion with the intention of conveying the information that it is raining in Athens, while her hearer, who is in New York, would be perfectly entitled to assess her utterance as correct or incorrect independently of the state of the weather in Athens, and according to the state of the weather in New York. If this were how we actually assessed the correctness of such utterances, then, we wouldn't know how to make true assertions about the weather, if not by means of sentences that make explicit reference to a particular location.

Now, even though Evans is right in claiming that treating the time parameter (or the location parameter, for that matter) along truth-relativistic lines has unacceptable consequences, this provides no argument against truth relativism itself, since the truth-relativistic treatment is not intended to be applied to those parameters in the first place. If these remarks are to provide the basis for an argument against relativism, then it ought to be possible to generalize them somehow, so that they entail inadmissible consequences for relativism, even when the relativistic treatment of the parameters relevant to propositional truth is initially restricted in the intended way. However, such a generalization, I'll argue, is not possible.

The generalization may be attempted in two different directions. Let's call a proposition whose truth value depends upon a contextual feature  $F$  an  $F$ -neutral proposition, and an utterance (assertion) that expresses an  $F$ -neutral proposition, an  $F$ -sensitive utterance (assertion). As a first way of generalizing the objection, it may be argued that, if a relativistic treatment of time- and location-sensitive utterances makes for an incoherent practice of communication, it will cause similar problems when applied to taste-sensitive utterances. A second way of generalizing the objection would be to hold that, if a relativistic practice of assessment were indeed operative for some  $F$ -sensitive utterances, then this relativity would actually characterize the assessment of all  $F$ -sensitive utterances, and hence our communicative lives would be swarmed by incoherent practices of communication such as the one previously described.

Let's start with the first direction of the generalization. In this case, it's not clear how the application of a relativistic treatment to matters of taste may cause the problems it would cause in the case of time and location. Suppose that A sincerely asserts that apples are tasty. Now suppose that B, who doesn't like apples, finds that proposition false. As a result of that, she'll find A's assertion incorrect, and she'll be entitled to reject it as such. Hence, B may very well retort something like:

(4) No, they are not, they are quite insipid.

Then, A and B may go on to argue whether apples are tasty or not, or they may leave the matter unsettled. In any event, what's relevant to our present concern is that, far

from being an incoherent practice of communication, this exchange seems to be quite characteristic of the way exchanges concerning matters of taste actually develop.

To see that this way of assessing correctness is not suspect in the way hinted at by Evans, we may, following Greenough (2011), make Evans' problem more precise.

As it turns out, Evans may be raising two problems for relative truth:

(P1) It's not clear where should an asserter aim to in making assertions (and where should an interpreter take her to be aiming in interpreting her utterance).

(P2) It's not clear when has she made a correct assertion.

These problems, in turn, generate two challenges: the challenge of providing a suitable aim for assertion, and the challenge of specifying when an assertion is correct and when it is incorrect. Evans' contention is that an unstable notion of correctness cannot provide adequate answers to neither of these problems, and that any answer to the challenges these problems pose will generate a once-and-for-all assessment of an assertion as correct or incorrect in a way that is incompatible with relativism.

However, (P1) can be readily dealt with: In making an assertion, the speaker should aim to truth according to her own perspective. That's the import of ( $T_R$ ). If all we are asked is to provide something to aim to, ( $T_R$ ) can very well do that. Whether this is an adequate aim will depend on whether the resulting practice is a coherent one (which, I've been arguing, it seems to be). Hence, as far as providing assistance in deciding what to say (and in interpreting others) goes, it seems that relative truth can provide such an assistance.

It is also possible to check that the adoption of ( $T_R$ ) as a norm of assertion doesn't entail a rejection of a relativistic practice of assessment. This was, indeed, the second part of Evans' concern, namely that any answer to where should an asserter aim to in making assertions will generate a stable assessment of an utterance as correct or incorrect. This concern, however, seems to rest upon the idea that the aim of the speaker in making an assertion determines the way in which we ought to assess that assertion. And, in contexts of relative truth, this connection must be qualified.

The practice of assertion is a complex practice that has two distinct sub-practices, the sub-practice of making assertions and the sub-practice of assessing them. These sub-practices may be guided by norms that relativize truth to different standards. This is what happens once we adopt an assessment-sensitive notion of correctness. In making assertions, the asserter aims to correctness according to her own circumstance. In interpreting the utterances of others, the interpreter presupposes compliance with the norm of assertion (or, at any rate, the intention of complying with it). However, in assessing the assertions of others (or hers, at a later time), an assessor does so according to her own circumstance, not the asserter's (or hers at the time of utterance). And, in doing so, she's not following ( $T_R$ ), but ( $C_R$ ). This is characteristic of assertion when correctness is a relative matter: the aim by which we measure the correctness of an assertion is not necessarily the same as the aim the speaker had in making it—the speaker aims to correctness with respect to her standard, while the assessor looks for correctness with respect to her own (the assessor's) standard. Hence, recognizing that

the norm of assertion demands correctness with respect to the speaker's perspective doesn't entail speaker-oriented assessments.<sup>5</sup>

The second problem, (P2), requires a closer examination. Given that *correctness* may be understood in different ways, (P2) may have more than one reading. Thus, instead of (P2), we have:

(P2a) It's not clear when has an asserter made a true assertion.

(P2b) It's not clear when has she complied with the norms of assertion.

(P2c) It's not clear when does she have adequate grounds for asserting.

(P2bc) can also be readily dealt with. The answer to (P2b) is that she complies with the norm of assertion ( $T_R$ ) when she aims to truth according to her own perspective. And the answer to (P2c) is that, in complying with ( $T_R$ ), she also makes an assertion on adequate grounds (provided that apples' being tasty according to one's standard gives one adequate grounds for asserting that they are).

Neither of these answers generates a stable assessment of an assertion as correct or incorrect in a sense of *correctness* that is incompatible with truth relativism, for the senses of *correctness* involved in (P2b) and (P2c) are not the sense involved in the characterization of relativism. Having been made in compliance with ( $T_R$ ) and having been made on adequate grounds may very well be stable features of an utterance that give rise to stable assessments of that utterance as correct or incorrect, but not in a sense of *correctness* relevant to relativism, which pertains the truth of an assertion.

Correctness as truth, however, is the sense of correctness involved in (P2a). And this problem cannot be so readily dealt with. Moreover, any general answer to when has an asserter made a true assertion would indeed generate a stable assessment of an assertion as correct or incorrect in a sense of *correctness* that is incompatible with relativism about truth. The problem itself, however, can be somewhat unceremoniously dismissed. As Greenough (2011) points out, we may reject (P2a) itself as posing an illegitimate question: since it requires an answer of the form *an assertion is (unqualifiedly) correct if and only if it possesses feature F* (where *F* is supposed to be an invariant feature of the utterance in question), it presupposes the falsity of truth relativism. Hence, we are entitled to reject it on the grounds that it begs the question against relativism about truth.

Thus, it is possible to counter the first direction of the purported generalization: correctness as an unstable feature of assertions provides an acceptable aim for assertion, and it doesn't entail a speaker-oriented practice of assessment, when we are dealing with truth-relativistic areas of discourse. And, when so restricted, the linguistic practice that arises from it is not an incoherent one.

The second direction of the generalization seems to be required by García-Carpintero's (2008) take on the issue. He argues that, if utterance truth were assessment-sensitive, the speaker could not rationally take responsibility for making correct assertions, since correctness would then be beyond her control. Hence, truth relativism,

<sup>5</sup> This is one way of describing what's happening in the practice of making and assessing assertions, one that employs the explicitly relativized truth predicate that features in ( $T_R$ ) and ( $C_R$ ). As we'll see in the next section, there is a way of describing this same practice in terms of a single aim, albeit a perspectival one: correctness (or accuracy) as a (possibly) unstable feature of our utterances.



were it true, would entail that the speaker cannot rationally comply with the injunction of making mostly correct assertions. More precisely, he asks us to consider what would happen if we were to accept two views: (i) the view that sentences containing the first person pronoun express *de se* (i.e., agent-neutral) propositions, and (ii) the view that the correctness conditions of utterances made by means of such sentences are assessment-sensitive. Certainly, under those assumptions, it wouldn't be possible for any speaker to convey information about herself by means of first-person sentences. Hence, the conclusion follows, truth relativism cannot be the right view.<sup>6</sup>

Now, García-Carpintero is not arguing for the restricted point that assessment sensitivity is the wrong way to go as far as time, location and agent are concerned. This much we can grant, and poses no immediate problem for relativism. Rather, he takes himself to be arguing against truth relativism in general. And we've argued that, when assessment sensitivity is restricted to areas of discourse such as matters of taste, truth relativism is actually not affected by Evans' considerations. Hence, García-Carpintero's considerations against truth relativism are warranted only insofar as the application of a truth-relativistic treatment to first-person utterances is somehow required by truth relativism (contrary to the relativist's intentions). And the only reason why we *ought* to make such an application I can think of is something like the second direction of the intended generalization: if we apply that treatment to *any* *F*-neutral utterance (assertion), then we should apply it to *every* *F*-neutral utterance (assertion). The problem with this is that there are no good reasons to accept such a connection. Truth relativism is perfectly coherent as a local thesis, restricted to a few, selected areas of discourse. It doesn't seem to be, of necessity, a thesis concerning the whole language, and no argument to the effect that relativism cannot be a purely local thesis has been offered. Hence, there seems to be no reason to extend the truth-relativistic treatment of the parameters relevant to propositional truth to domains that are inadequate for such extension.

If the generalization of Evans' considerations fails, these considerations cannot provide reasons against truth relativism, when it is put forward as a local thesis about certain areas of discourse. Hence, relativism about truth seems to be in good conceptual standing, *vis-à-vis* the problems raised by assertion when relative truth is taken as its aim.

## 6 Objections

In this last section, I want to consider two objections that may be raised against the proposal just made. The first is whether the strategy of understanding truth relativism in terms of utterance correctness, as we did in Sect. 2, can be successful. The second concerns the possibility of explaining disagreement and retraction in terms of the semantic and pragmatic apparatus we've developed so far.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Actually, García-Carpintero considers the case of a promise made by means of a first-person sentence. However, his discussion applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of assertion.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to two anonymous reviewers from *Synthese* for calling my attention to these important issues.

Let's turn to the first objection. In the preceding sections, I countenanced the view that assertion is a practice governed by a norm for making assertions, ( $T_R$ ), and a norm for assessing them, ( $C_R$ ). It may be objected that this distinction actually imperils the possibility of understanding truth relativism in terms of relativism about utterance correctness (even when correctness is understood in our favored sense), for ( $T_R$ ) and ( $C_R$ ) seem to involve different notions of correctness: the former requires correctness with respect to the standard of the asserter, and the latter requires correctness with respect to the standard of the assessor. And, while the latter is relative in the sense that it varies according to the situation of assessment, the former is not, for it is fixed once and for all by the context of utterance.

A comparison with the Kaplanian notion of truth *simpliciter* may help bring the point home. It is possible to extract the following notion of correctness from ( $T_R$ ):

(AC) An utterance of  $S$  in  $c$  is *assertion-correct* iff the proposition expressed by  $S$  in  $c$  is true at  $\langle w_c, s_c \rangle$ .

Now, there is a striking resemblance between assertion-correctness and the notion, introduced by Kaplan (1989), of truth *simpliciter* for occurrences of sentences, which we may characterize along the following lines (allowing for the relativization of propositional truth to a standard of taste):

(TS) An occurrence of  $S$  in  $c$  is true *simpliciter* iff the proposition expressed by  $S$  in  $c$  is true at  $\langle w_c, s_c \rangle$ .

We may provide a parallel definition of a notion of correctness *simpliciter* for utterances in order to make the comparison even more transparent:

(CS) An utterance of  $S$  in  $c$  is correct *simpliciter* iff the proposition expressed by  $S$  in  $c$  is true at  $\langle w_c, s_c \rangle$ .

The coincidence between the right hand sides of (TS) and (CS), on the one hand, and the right hand side of (AC), on the other, would indicate that the notion of assertion-correctness is actually the Kaplanian notion of correctness *simpliciter*.

That this notion of assertion-correctness (correctness *simpliciter*) is different from the relativistic notion of correctness is then revealed by the possibility of using the following sentence to make a true statement:

(5) The utterance was correct *simpliciter*, but nonetheless incorrect.<sup>8</sup>

Doesn't this show that the notions of correctness (as used in ( $C_R$ )) and of assertion-correctness and correctness *simpliciter* (as characterized by (AC) and (CS)) diverge? And, doesn't this divergence entail that ( $T_R$ ) and ( $C_R$ ) employ, after all, different

<sup>8</sup> To see that (5) may indeed be true, consider a situation in which a speaker, A, makes an assertion with assessment-sensitive correctness conditions, such as that apples are tasty. Let's stipulate that this assertion is correct with respect to the circumstance of evaluation determined by the context of utterance. By (CS), it will also be correct *simpliciter*. Now, suppose that B, who occupies a relevantly different context of assessment, deems incorrect A's assertion that apples are tasty, for the proposition that apples are tasty is false relative to her (B's) standard of taste. In this situation, (5) will come out true (as assessed from B's perspective, at least).

notions of truth and correctness? So, it seems, there are two notions of correctness at play in our proposal, only one of which is relativistic in nature. The other seems to be a contextualist notion, not suitable for grounding truth relativism. Hence, it seems that we have no general relativism about correctness, and it is hard to see how a mix of contextualist and relativist notions of correctness may provide any understanding of relativism about truth.

Let's start with the points of agreement. A first point of agreement is that both ( $T_R$ ) and (CS) place the same constraint on the speaker (once we regard (CS) as a principle guiding assertion), namely that of asserting only what's true at the circumstance of utterance. A second point of agreement is that it is indeed possible to define a notion of correctness like *assertion-correctness*, different from the notion of correctness that underlies ( $C_R$ ). Even more, it is a notion we actually employ, and it is an important notion, needed to make sense of the utterances of others. A final point of agreement is that it actually coincides with the Kaplanian notion of correctness *simpliciter*.

But here is where agreement ends. It is true that ( $T_R$ ) may seem like a contextualist principle. After all, it invokes, in its formulation, the idea of correctness according to the standard of the asserter, not the assessor's. And I'm ready to grant that, as far as the making of assertions goes, there is no practical difference between relativist and contextualist accounts. Indeed, both views could, without problem, adopt ( $T_R$ ) as the norm guiding assertion, yielding the same verdicts as to when someone has made an assertion that complies with the norm for making it. But this does not entail that we are actually employing a contextualist notion of correctness in endorsing ( $T_R$ ).

What we may legitimately conclude from this situation is that the empirical difference between relativist and contextualist views is not located in the making of assertions, but in their assessment. It is here where the difference between contextualist and relativist views comes to the fore, since the contextualist analogue of ( $C_R$ ) would be:

( $C_C$ ) An assertion that  $p$  made at a context  $c$  is correct if and only if  $p$  is true at  $\langle w_c, s_c \rangle$ .

Thus, relativism and contextualism yield different verdicts when it comes to the assessment as correct or incorrect (in our favored sense) of a certain class of assertions.

However, we cannot conclude from this that the notion of correctness involved in ( $T_R$ ) is contextualist in nature, and that the only notion of correctness that is perspectival is the one involved in ( $C_R$ ). Rather, it seems that ( $T_R$ ) needs to be supplemented with a principle for assessment, be it ( $C_R$ ) or ( $C_C$ ), in order to yield a view that is either relativist or contextualist in its empirical consequences. So, it seems, ( $T_R$ ) is not enough, by itself, to fix one notion of correctness as opposed to the other. Hence, we are not, in fact, obliged to conclude that the notions of correctness involved in ( $T_R$ ) and in ( $C_R$ ) are indeed different. Granted, these principles relativize propositional truth to different standards, the asserter's and the assessor's respectively. But this doesn't entail that we are dealing with different notions of correctness in each principle, and that the correctness to which the asserter aims in making assertions is not perspectival.

This only means that there is a privileged situation of assessment for the purpose of making an assertion, that of the asserter.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, we should regard  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_R)$  as jointly expressing a perspectival notion of correctness, that of correctness as an unstable feature of assertions which varies according to a perspective. Then we may regard  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_R)$  as encoding which perspective is relevant for each kind of act: for the making of an assertion, it's the asserter's perspective, and for the assessment of an assertion, it's the assessor's. Hence,  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_R)$  spell out the correctness of an assertion as a feature that may vary according to the context occupied by the agent performing the relevant action (be it the making or the assessment of an assertion). In a similar fashion,  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_C)$  may be seen as jointly expressing an absolute notion of correctness, the relevant perspective being the one determined by the context of utterance. Once we read  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_R)$  in this way, we can see that there is no contextualist notion of correctness involved in our proposal. Rather, the import of  $(T_R)$  is just that the context occupied by the asserter is privileged for the purpose of determining correctness when making an assertion, while the import of  $(C_R)$  is that the context of utterance enjoys no similar privilege for the purpose of assessment.

Now, what about assertion-correctness and the possible truth of (5)? Assertion-correctness is indeed an important notion of correctness we actually possess and employ in understanding the utterances of others. Moreover, it does seem to be the notion of truth (correctness) *simpliciter* put forward by Kaplan, which is also the notion of correctness employed by contextualist accounts to give empirical content to the corresponding theories (as in Kölbel 2008).

Let's start by noticing that assertion-correctness corresponds, from a truth-relativistic perspective, to the idea that the speaker who has made an assertion-correct utterance has fulfilled her duties as an asserter. It doesn't correspond to the idea that she has made a correct utterance, but merely to the idea that she has made a faultless one (taking into account her perspective). That these two things may indeed come apart is the gist of relativism. Hence, assertion-correctness is an important notion because it's what's at stake in interpreting the utterances of others (as the discussion of Evans' problem in Sect. 5 made clear), but it's not the notion of correctness that guides our assessments.

Now, it seems to me that the existence of the notion of assertion-correctness doesn't actually imperil the possibility of understanding truth relativism in terms of a perspectival notion of correctness, for assertion-correctness is not the notion of correctness that gives empirical content to the predicate *true at*  $\langle w, s \rangle$ . On the contrary, the empirical content of this predicate comes from the joint action of  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_R)$ .

To see this, let's delve a bit into the role of truth (correctness) *simpliciter* in contextualist accounts of taste predicates. Contextualist accounts employ a principle like  $(C_C)$  in order to connect the truth predicate *true at*  $\langle w, s \rangle$  with an ordinary notion of correctness. Indeed,  $(C_C)$ , as well as Kaplan's definition of truth *simpliciter*, amount to semantic-pragmatic bridging principles that give (empirical) content to a semantic theory (*cf.* Kölbel 2008). Thus, the role that the notion of correctness *simpliciter* has

<sup>9</sup> For a similar idea, see Egan et al. (2005).

in a contextualist theory is that of connecting the semantic apparatus with the use of language, and to give empirical content to the formal truth predicate deployed in the semantic clauses. Assertion-correctness doesn't actually imperil a relativistic understanding of *true at*  $\langle w, s \rangle$  in terms of a perspectival notion of correctness because neither  $(C_C)$  nor  $(AC)$  are the principles connecting this predicate with the use of language. Rather, this is the task assumed jointly by  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_R)$ .  $(AC)$  doesn't have the central role it has in contextualist theories. It certainly has an important role to play, but it's not this one.

Also, because of this difference in theoretical role, we should refrain from simply identifying assertion-correctness with the Kaplanian notions of truth or correctness *simpliciter*, even if they have the same characterization: not only do they play different theoretical roles, but also they do not try to capture the same notion of correctness (they capture correctness as compliance with the norms of assertion and correctness as truth, respectively). Moreover, at this point there is a substantive disagreement, I think, between contextualist and relativist theories. From a contextualist point of view, assertion-correctness *is* the intuitive notion of correctness *simpliciter*, i.e., the notion of correctness that guides our assessments. From a relativist standpoint, on the other hand, the intuitive notion of correctness *simpliciter* is *not* the notion of assertion-correctness, but it corresponds to a perspectival one, to be understood along the lines of  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_R)$ .

And this disagreement has an impact on the interpretation of (5). Indeed, once we, in a relativistic mood, refrain from identifying assertion-correctness with the intuitive notion of correctness *simpliciter* (which we take to be perspectival), it becomes clear that 'correct *simpliciter*' in (5) is to be read as a technical expression standing for assertion-correctness, and not as an expression with its intended, intuitive reading. Read in this way, what the truth of (5) entails is that the perspectival notion of correctness is different from the absolute notion of assertion-correctness. But it doesn't entail that it is different from the intuitive notion of correctness *simpliciter*, nor that it is different from any notion of correctness that is used to give the semantic theory its empirical content. So, it seems, utterance correctness, as jointly expressed by  $(T_R)$  and  $(C_R)$ , provides a good ground to understand relativism about truth.

Let's turn now to the second objection. According to this objection, it's not clear how disagreement and retraction in areas of relative truth can be explained in terms of the semantic and pragmatic apparatus that we've developed in the previous sections.

Indeed, suppose that A and B are two subjects with relevantly different standards of taste, so that A sincerely utters:

- (1) Apples are tasty, and B sincerely rejects A's assertion. As a result of this, B takes herself to be in disagreement with A. (B could be A at a different point in her life, after experiencing a relevant change in her standard of taste, so that this disagreement could be the prelude to a retraction.)

One pressing question concerning this case is: Are we able to explain why B should take herself to be disagreeing with A (and why she should feel inclined to dispute A's assertion, or to retract it, if A and B are indeed the same agent)? After all, as we've remarked in the previous section, B, in interpreting A's assertion, uses the presumption

that A is complying with the norm of assertion ( $T_R$ ), thus concluding that A's assertion is correct in the sense of being in compliance with ( $T_R$ ) and in the sense of having been made on adequate grounds. It's true that, in assessing that same assertion, B employs ( $C_R$ ) and concludes that A's assertion is incorrect in the sense of expressing a proposition that is false with respect to B's standard of taste. Despite this, A's assertion was perfectly rational and correct, even by B's interpretive standards. Now, if it was perfectly rational for A to assert as she did, and if B is reflectively aware of all of this, it seems that B has no reason to take herself to be in disagreement with A, nor to dispute A's assertion (or to retract her previous assertion, if B is A at a different point in her life).

In order to make room for disagreement, it will be useful to clarify in what disagreement consists. In general, disagreement (be it between two agents or between an agent and her former self) may be understood either as a state or as an activity. For our purposes, two people may be said to disagree in the state sense if they hold views or attitudes with respect to a given subject matter that are (in a sense to be elucidated) incompatible, regardless of whether they are aware of such situation. And two people may be said to disagree in the activity sense if they engage in disagreement, often as a result of thinking that they hold incompatible views or attitudes with respect to a given subject matter, regardless of whether they actually do. Also, B may be said to be in a state of disagreement with A if B holds an attitude with respect to a given subject matter that is incompatible with A's, and B may be said to take herself to disagree with A if B thinks that she holds an attitude with respect to a given subject matter that is incompatible with A's.

The crux at this point is to provide a good enough grip on the idea of two attitudes (beliefs, assertions) being incompatible.<sup>10</sup> It seems to me that this grip may be provided by MacFarlane's notion of *preclusion of joint accuracy* (MacFarlane *ms*, 6.4).<sup>11</sup> Briefly, the idea is that A and B disagree (as to whether  $p$ ) if the accuracy of A's attitude (belief, assertion) towards  $p$  precludes the accuracy of B's. Accuracy is here understood in the following way: a belief (assertion) that  $p$  is accurate just in case  $p$  is true with respect to the circumstance of evaluation relevant for the assessment of that belief (assertion). In the case of taste predicates, the relevant circumstance is partly determined by the assessor's perspective, while in the case of time, location or agent, it is wholly determined by the context of utterance. (The key notion, *preclusion*, is left unexplicated. However, we do seem to have a good enough grasp of what preclusion is supposed to be.)

Given this characterization of disagreement, A and B are indeed in disagreement (in the state sense): the accuracy of A's assertion precludes the accuracy of B's rejection, for the proposition that A asserts is false according to B's own standard of taste, while B considers its contradictory, that apples are not tasty, to be true according to that same standard. And, where A's assertion true, B's rejection could not be true as well.

<sup>10</sup> The problem is not peculiar to relativism, but it affects nonindexical contextualism as well.

<sup>11</sup> MacFarlane (*ms*) is a draft, and the views laid out there may not end up being MacFarlane's official views of this issue. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the explication of disagreement in terms of preclusion of joint accuracy is an advance with respect to the earlier attempt to understand disagreement in terms of the CAN'T BOTH BE ACCURATE clause that features in MacFarlane (2007).

Also, B should take herself to be in a state of disagreement with A, for she's aware of this situation: B knows that A accepts a proposition she rejects, and she knows that A's acceptance and her (B's) rejection cannot both be accurate.

So, the problem is not so much why B should take herself to be in a state of disagreement with A, but why should B feel compelled to dispute A's assertion, or to retract it, if A is B's former self: Why couldn't B just "agree to disagree" with A?

With respect to why B should feel inclined to dispute A's assertion in general, my opinion is essentially that of [MacFarlane \(2007\)](#): assessment-sensitive utterances are designed to foster controversy in order to bring about coordination of contexts, which is a useful social purpose. Controversy in truth-relativistic areas of discourse may be seen as a way of trying to affect the attitudes of others to achieve convergence, or to make possible joint plans of action. For example, B may feel inclined to dispute A's assertion if she wants her to be open to the possibility of not having apples, or apple pie, for dessert, or she may feel inclined to enter into a dispute about which things are tasty and which are not in order to achieve consensus on what to order. Even if B is reflectively aware of the fact that apples are tasty according to A's standard of taste, she may find that engaging in this kind of dispute is useful in order to achieve those ends, and she may even consider it to be the most efficient way of doing so. If this is so, B may have good practical reasons to engage in a truth-relativistic practice, even if fully aware of the implications of the relativity of truth.

Now, with respect to retraction, we haven't said anything about this type of speech act so far. The point of having a speech act like this one is to be able to "take back" another speech act, such as a question, a request, a command, or an assertion. Indeed, one of the consequences of retraction is to undo the commitments generated by the speech act that is being retracted. So, as far as the obligation to retract is concerned, it seems to me that it may be explained by the commitments generated by assertion.

One plausible view regarding these commitments is that, in making an assertion, the asserter is committing herself to the truth of what she asserts. This general commitment involves further, more specific ones. One such commitment that will be relevant for our present concern is the commitment to accept responsibility if someone else acts or reasons from what is asserted, and it proves to have been untrue (*cfr.* [MacFarlane \(2005\)](#)). This commitment may be motivated along the following lines. The act of assertion involves the presentation of a content as true, and it also conveys that the asserter has good grounds for thinking it is true. Hence, asserting something has the effect of presenting what's asserted as something upon which it is safe to base reasoning and action. And this is what motivates the idea of responsibility: if, in asserting, an agent presents a proposition as a suitable basis for reasoning and action, she may be held responsible if someone else relies upon that proposition as a consequence of accepting the agent's assertion.

In a relativistic key, this commitment may be stated as:

**Responsibility.** In asserting that  $p$  at a context  $c$ , one undertakes the commitment to accept responsibility, at a context  $c'$ , if someone acts or reasons from  $p$ , and  $p$  is shown to be untrue at  $\langle w_c, s_{c'} \rangle$ ,

where  $c'$  is the context occupied by the asserter at the time at which the responsibility claim is issued.<sup>12</sup> This commitment actually motivates another commitment (which is more generally accepted as a commitment generated by assertion), namely the commitment to withdraw an assertion if proven false:

**Withdrawal.** In asserting that  $p$  at a context  $c$ , one undertakes the commitment to withdraw the assertion, at a context  $c'$ , if  $p$  is shown to be untrue at  $\langle w_c, s_{c'} \rangle$ ,

where  $c'$  is, again, the context that the asserter occupies at the time at which the refutation is put forward.<sup>13</sup> And from this commitment we may extract the following norm for retraction:

(R) At a context  $c'$ ,  $A$  ought to retract an assertion that  $p$  made by  $A$  in context  $c$  if  $p$  is untrue at  $\langle w_c, s_{c'} \rangle$ .

Indeed, there seems to be little (if any) difference between withdrawal and retraction. **Withdrawal** expresses the commitment to retract an assertion under a certain condition, while (R) is the norm requiring retraction under that same condition: untruth at the context of assessment currently occupied by the speaker.

What's the upshot of these commitments? First of all, committing oneself to the truth of an assertion is to be understood as committing oneself to the accuracy of that assertion, i.e., as a commitment to the truth of what's asserted with respect to any context of assessment one may come to occupy, and not merely to its truth with respect to the context of utterance. (In other terms, we are committing ourselves to the correctness of our claim with respect to any perspective we may come to occupy, and not merely to its being assertion-correct.) Given this commitment, any context at which an agent doesn't retract an assertion is a context at which she continues to present its content as true, hence as an adequate basis for reasoning and action. Indeed, it follows from what it is to be committed to the truth of an assertion in a relativistic setting that an agent will be committed to the truth of the content of her assertion in any new context she comes to occupy, unless she retracts her assertion. So, she may still be held responsible for a past assertion she no longer considers true, if she doesn't take it back. Thus, the obligation to retract seems to be a consequence of how the commitment to truth involved in assertion is to be spelled out in truth-relativistic terms: B's obligation to retract seems to follow from how we should understand the normative commitments of assertion and the speech act of retraction in terms of relative truth.

Now, it is true that B may indeed take her previous assertion as involving the expression of an attitude she no longer has, and since it was made on grounds that she deemed adequate at the time, she may feel no pressure to dispute it on account of any fault committed at that time. Moreover, since she wasn't trying to mislead anyone in asserting the way she did, it may be hard to see how could she be held responsible for her assertion in any way. However, as we've already seen, in making her previous

<sup>12</sup> For the rationale for this way of spelling out this commitment, see [MacFarlane \(2005\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> **Responsibility** leads to **Withdrawal** in the following way: if an agent doesn't want to be held responsible for the consequences of someone else's acting or reasoning upon an assertion she made, then she has to disavow that assertion, so as to stop presenting its content as a suitable basis for reasoning and action. Otherwise, she'll continue to vouch for its content.



assertion, B wasn't merely committing herself to the truth of her assertion with respect to the context of utterance, but with respect to any context she might come to occupy after that. So, if B, as the result of a change in her standard of taste, comes to think that a previous assertion of hers is actually false, she will no longer be willing to vouch for its content, to present it as a suitable basis for action and reasoning. But, if she doesn't retract her assertion, she will still be doing precisely that, and she will still be subject to being held responsible if someone acts or reasons on the basis of a proposition she now considers false. Even if she wasn't trying to mislead anyone when she made her assertion, she will be potentially misleading someone given her new context, for, if there is no retraction, she will still be endorsing what she said as true. So, she should feel compelled to retract her previous assertion, even if she has no reason to think that it was faulty when made.

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