

2015-03-05

Relativism, Disagreement, and Assertion

Micah C. Dugas

University of Miami, micahdugas2@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations

Recommended Citation

Dugas, Micah C., "Relativism, Disagreement, and Assertion" (2015). *Open Access Dissertations*. 1362.
https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations/1362

This Open access is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

RELATIVISM, DISAGREEMENT, AND ASSERTION

By

Micah C. Dugas

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2015

©2015
Micah C. Dugas
All Rights Reserved

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

RELATIVISM, DISAGREEMENT, AND ASSERTION

Micah C. Dugas

Approved:

Harvey Siegel, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy

Risto Hilpinen, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy

Otavio Bueno, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy

M. Brian Blake, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Keith Lehrer, Ph.D.
Regents Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus
University of Arizona

DUGAS, MICAH C.
Relativism, Disagreement, and Assertion.

(Ph.D., Philosophy)
(May 2015)

Abstract of a dissertation at the University of Miami.

Dissertation supervised by Professor Harvey Siegel.
No. of pages in text. (240)

In this dissertation, I examine the work of several recent relativists with regard to the matters of disagreement and assertion. While I focus on the work of contemporary relativists such as Steven Hales, Max Kölbel, and John MacFarlane, I think the conclusions I reach are largely generalizable to any relativistic thesis that allows the possibility that both parties to a dispute are correct or justified in holding contradictory beliefs or in making contradictory assertions. I aim to show that relativism undermines our straightforward sense of disagreement, and further, that the view cannot plausibly be reconciled with various norms of assertion in a way that allows us to explain how we can sensibly argue over matters whose truth is thought to be relative. Due to these problems, the relativist's solution is ultimately no more satisfying than the sort of contextualist views that many relativists argue against.

To my parents, for all of their love and support

Acknowledgements

I would first and foremost like to thank my parents for all of their support throughout the years. To my mother, my first and best teacher. No one has seen to my education with the dedication that she has, from my earliest years of learning onward. And to my father, who helped to cultivate my earliest attempts at critical thinking and analysis by teaching me to find the right intellectual tool rather than defaulting to my “guess hammer.” This dissertation would not have been possible without them. And to my siblings Alayna, Ethan, and Heidi, for all their patience over the years in dealing with a philosopher brother. I would also like to thank the many teachers who have shaped my thinking, philosophical and otherwise, over the years. To Patricia Rickels, Ian Kinsella, Ebba Schoonover, Keith Korcz, and Istvan Berkeley, for their years of friendship and encouragement. And a special thanks to Harvey Siegel and the members of my committee for their invaluable feedback and criticism. I would like to thank all the Huffles who over the years made Miami a home. To my big brothers Mark Warren and Ryan Lake, who took the new kid under their wing. To Stephanie Saline, for many enjoyable morning conversations over coffee. To Robin Neiman, for being the most pleasant Canadian in Miami. And to Fredrik Haraldsen, who in addition to being a wonderful friend, is also responsible for introducing me to the most disgusting licorice I have ever tasted. Finally, I would like to thank my love, Brooke, for all of her encouragement and support through the many months of work. I am a better person by knowing her.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The History of an Idea	1
Chapter 2: Hales and the Foundations of Relativism	36
Chapter 3: Kölbel's Relativism and the Possibility of Faultless Disagreement	75
Chapter 4: MacFarlane's Relativism and the Possibility of Disagreement	112
Chapter 5: The Norms of Assertion	158
Chapter 6: Relativism and the Norms of Assertion	189
Chapter 7: Final Thoughts	231
Bibliography	234

Chapter 1 - The History of an Idea

I. An overview of my project

Relativism is a view with a very long history, reaching as far back as classical Greece. Protagoras' doctrine of *homo mensura* ("man is the measure") was perhaps the first formulation of the view, with Plato's response in the *Theaetetus* the first attempt at a systematic refutation. However, in spite of two and a half millennia of debate, relativism remains a controversial and much-discussed position among theorists in the humanities and social sciences. Although "relativism" is often an umbrella term for a variety of philosophical positions, I take relativism to be the view that a) some class of sentences or propositions are true or justified only relative to various frameworks, and b) different frameworks yield different judgments without any way to neutrally evaluate the epistemic status of the frameworks themselves.

My use of "frameworks" at this stage is meant to serve as a general term that captures the relativist's appeal to perspectives, standards, conceptual schemes, paradigms, etc. The particular theory with which I am concerned can therefore be labeled Framework Relativism. It is important to note that someone may defend relativism regarding one domain of inquiry while rejecting it with regard to others. The theorists whose views I will consider are generally careful to restrict their relativism to certain domains of discourse, and to argue for the relative truth of claims within these particular domains rather than for the relative truth of *all* claims within *all* domains. As we will see, all of the relativists whom I will discuss advocate relativism regarding normative domains such as taste, beauty, or goodness.

One well-known critique of relativism comes in the form of Davidson's argument that we cannot make sense of the idea that truth or reality is relative to conceptual schemes, where the latter are characterized as languages that fit or organize the world of experience.¹ According to Davidson, if we take conceptual schemes to be languages (or more precisely, sets of inter-translatable languages), then two speakers will occupy different conceptual schemes if they speak languages that cannot be translated one into another. Failure of translation may be either partial, in which case some range of sentences in one language can be translated into the other while some cannot, or complete, in which case no sentences from one can be translated into the other. Davidson then argues that we cannot make sense of either partial or complete untranslatability, with the result that the very idea of a conceptual scheme is unintelligible.

If Davidson's arguments are successful, then at least some varieties of relativism cannot even get off the ground. However, it is not obvious that his identification of conceptual schemes with languages has traction against the forms of relativism that I will address. Davidson's arguments seem more forceful against the views of Kuhn and Whorf, who relativize truth and ontology to languages.² On the other hand, the theorists with whom I will be concerned do not defend this kind of relativism. With regard to their views, I think that there is a much older, and better objection.

Plato is the originator of the most famous argument against relativism, with some version of his response to Protagoras still hovering in the background of the current debate.³ I will explain in more detail the substance of Plato's objection, but in broad outline his central insight was that the relativist's view is in some sense incoherent, self-

¹ Davidson (1973).

² See Kuhn (1996) and Whorf (1956).

³ See Plato's dialogue the *Theaetetus* for his response to Protagoras' doctrine of *homo mensura*.

undermining, or self-refuting. Due to the fact that theorists on both sides on the issue often misunderstand both this objection and relativism itself, there is room to clarify what conditions a relativistic position must include to succumb to the charge of self-undermining. Thus, the self-undermining objection and relativism help to shed light on each other.

However, while I think that the accusation of self-undermining is a very powerful objection, it will not form the core of my dissertation for a few reasons. First, I think that others have already given this issue adequate treatment.⁴ I have little to add to this discussion, and will instead take it for granted that any view that is self-undermining (in the way to be discussed shortly) is unworthy of rational acceptance. Although part of my project will involve examining the extent to which this problem arises for the views of Steven Hales, Max Kölbel, and John MacFarlane, I will be less interested in focusing on this problem directly, and will instead consider some related problems with relativism. Second, since self-undermining requires that the view in question be reflexive, this problem will not arise for versions of relativism that lack this feature. At least in the cases of MacFarlane and (in certain moods) Kölbel, their positions lack reflexivity, and therefore do not succumb to self-undermining. However, as I will argue, there are interesting parallels between the problems faced by those versions of relativism that are self-undermining, and those that are not. In particular, I will examine the problems for epistemology that afflict both types of relativism.

Relativists have traditionally wanted not only to explain what it means for a claim to be relatively true, but also to harmonize relativism with the common phenomenon of

⁴ Harvey Siegel has probably done the most in the current literature to explain the Platonic argument and to show its effectiveness against more recent defenses of relativism. See Siegel (1984), (1987), (1999), (2004), (2007b), and (2011).

disagreement. Much of the historical motivation for relativism arose from the fact that encounters with other cultures and persons showed us that we often hold fundamentally different beliefs about what is moral, beautiful, or true. The recognition of these differences has often led us to reexamine the reasons we have for thinking that we are right while those in other cultures or historical periods are wrong. Unfortunately, human history is littered with instances in which we have taken a far less tolerant attitude and have seen others' differences as evidence of their depravity or inhumanity. Against this sort of narrow-minded, dogmatic, imperialist thinking that has caused so much suffering in the world, the relativist offers us the antidote: We can both disagree with someone who believes other than we do, and simultaneously acknowledge that her contrary belief is also correct. However, doing this requires us to relinquish our binary views of truth and justification, according to which the truth or justification of one person's belief entails that anyone holding a contradictory belief is mistaken. The relativist therefore offers what may initially seem to be a refreshing change, a doctrine of tolerance accompanied by the advice to "live and let live."

However, I will argue that the relativist does not have the conceptual resources to provide a plausible account of how there can be genuine disagreements over claims whose truth is relative. If something is to count as a disagreement, then those involved must take anyone holding an incompatible belief to be wrong. Or at the very least, they cannot think of each other's beliefs as equally correct. This is a general feature of what it means for something to be a disagreement, and does not beg the question against the relativist. However, relativizing the truth of some class of propositions makes it possible for two people to both be right in believing contradictory things. But once they have

recognized that they are both right, they can no longer take themselves to be having a disagreement. The relativist's response to disagreement is not a solution but a dissolution, since there is no longer any disagreement to be explained. If this charge can be made to stick, it would undermine one of the main motivations both ancient and modern for positing relative truth in the first place.

Additional trouble for the relativist arises from a consideration of the norms governing our communicative acts of assertion and the role they play in disagreement. One important function of assertions (I do not claim the only, or even the most important one) is the persuasive role they play. To this end, we engage in the social practice of making assertions and responding to those of others. But the exchange of assertions is regulated by norms or rules, much as our monetary exchanges are governed by rules. I argue that plausible norms of assertion—for example, “Assert only what is true,” “Assert only what you know,” “Withdraw an assertion if it is shown that you do not have good reason for it,” and “Defend your assertion when someone else challenges it”—cannot be accommodated within the relativist's framework.

The difficulty for the relativist is to explain how a normative account of assertion can be reconciled with the relative truth of what is asserted. According to the relativist, the truth of our assertions has normative force only for the person occupying the relevant framework. This means that what is true in someone else's framework does not have any normative implications for what we should believe. How then can I justify my attempt to get someone who disagrees with me to change his or her mind? Assuming that her current belief is true relative to her perspective, adopting my view of the matter would mean believing what is false relative to her framework. But believing what is false

violates one of the primary constraints that many theorists, including relativists, place on belief. The relativist offers us a view of truth according to which we can disagree, but without the possibility of our assertions having any normative force for those outside our own frameworks. But as I will argue, these joint aims fundamentally conflict.

II. Kinds of relativism: a taxonomy

In broad outline, the relativist's claim is that one thing is relative to another. However, this does little to distinguish commonplace from more controversial versions of relativism. Einstein's claim that motion is relative to a frame of reference counts as an uncontroversial kind of relativism, whereas the claim that morality depends on cultures is far more questionable. Part of our task is to distinguish more from less controversial forms of relativism, and to explain this difference. There are many ways to categorize the different species of relativism. We may emphasize either the properties that are being relativized, or we may emphasize what these properties are being relativized to. I find particularly useful the 'identikit' picture presented by Susan Haack.⁵ Although it does not provide an exhaustive classification—it does not include the subspecies of different kinds of relativism—it does offer a straightforward way to see the main variations of the view. As can be seen below, the general formulation of Haack's approach is "X is relative to Y."

... IS RELATIVE TO ...

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (1) meaning | (a) language |
| (2) reference | (b) conceptual scheme |
| (3) truth | (c) theory |
| (4) metaphysical commitment | (d) scientific paradigm |
| (5) ontology | (e) version, depiction, description |
| (6) reality | (f) culture |
| (7) epistemic values | (g) community |
| (8) moral values | (h) individual |
| (9) aesthetic values | (i) perspective |

⁵ See Haack (2000), p. 149. Baghramian (2004), p. 6 also utilizes a variation of Haack's picture.

.	(j) context of assessment
.	(k) framework
.	(l) standard
.	.

By matching different items in the left-hand column with items on the right, we can depict different types of relativism, though as Haack notes, not all combinations will describe actual (or even possible) relativistic positions.⁶ For example, (7)(d), (8)(d), and (9)(d) do not correspond to plausible philosophical contenders. The views of Hales, Kölbel, and MacFarlane are first and foremost relativistic about the truth of certain classes of propositions, and are therefore a subspecies of (3). However, as I will explain shortly, locating their views within the right side of Haack’s identikit picture requires adding the bolded items to her table.

Steven Hales (Chapter 2) argues that the truth of so-called “philosophical propositions” is relative to perspectives, where the latter are “ways of knowing.”⁷ Unfortunately, none of the items on the right side of Haack’s list quite manage to capture his intended meaning. Her (b) or (e) probably come the closest, since Hales’ use of “perspectives” certainly includes something along the lines of conceptual schemes or depictions of the world. However, Haack intends for (e) to refer specifically to Goodman’s irrealism, and although Hales’ perspectives share some similarities with Goodman’s versions, using (e) for both unhelpfully blurs important distinctions.⁸

In the interest of maintaining these distinctions, I think that we would do well to represent Hales’ view by (3)(i), while bearing in mind the distinctly epistemological quality of his

⁶ Haack (2000), p. 150.

⁷ See Hales (2006).

⁸ See Goodman’s (1978), and Siegel’s (1984) for a discussion of the ambiguity of Goodman’s use of “versions” and what follows from different interpretations of his usage.

view of perspectives. However, (3)(k) and (3)(l) also capture important features of Hales' view.

Max Kölbel (Chapter 3) defends the view that the truth of propositions containing moral and taste predicates is also relative to perspectives (he also sometimes refers to "parameters"), though his view of perspectives differs from Hales'. In particular, unlike Hales, Kölbel does not think of perspectives as methods of gaining knowledge. Perspectives lack this epistemic feature on Kölbel's account, and are more like evaluative standards used to decide the truth in moral and aesthetic matters, although he does in places consider more sweeping varieties of relativism.⁹ With this difference between Hales' and Kölbel's use of "perspectives" in mind, I will represent Kölbel's relativism as (3)(i) as well. But as with Hales, (3)(k) and (3)(l) also approximate Kölbel's view.

John MacFarlane (Chapter 4) argues for the relative truth of propositions concerning taste, aesthetics, knowledge attributions, and epistemic modals, and can therefore be represented by (3) as well. His contribution to the continuing dialogue on relativism has been the idea that we should relativize the truth of certain classes of propositions to contexts of assessment in addition to contexts of use. Contexts of use are familiar from standard semantics *a la* Kaplan, and at the most general level they are possible worlds. Contexts of assessment, like Kölbel's perspectives, are evaluative standards that may produce contradictory truth-values for the same proposition within the same possible world. I will represent MacFarlane's relativism by (3)(j), although his view does share features in common with (3)(k) and (3)(l) as well.

I have classified each of the above positions as a variation of alethic relativism, i.e., relativism about truth. However, the picture is more complex than I have so far

⁹ For example, see his (2002), Chapter 7, and his (2011a).

indicated, since there are other taxonomic possibilities. For example, Hales' "philosophical propositions" include claims about ontology, reality, epistemology, morality, and aesthetics, and as a result, his relativism about truth entails relativism about (5)-(9). Since Kölbel's alethic relativism is largely confined to questions in ethics and aesthetics, his position can also be considered relativistic with regard to (8) and (9). MacFarlane's relativism is largely similar to Kölbel's, and so much of what counts as an accurate description of the latter will apply to the former as well.

One feature shared by all three theorists is the desire to formulate a version of relativism that parallels possible world semantics. As we shall see in more detail later, Hales, Kölbel, and MacFarlane are each explicit about their intention to make relativism plausible by showing that perspectives or contexts of assessment are relevantly and uncontroversially similar to possible worlds. Since we accept that a proposition can vary in truth-value relative to possible worlds, it is a short step (they argue) to accepting that the truth-value of a proposition can vary according to perspectives, standards, or contexts of assessment even within the same world.¹⁰ I will have something to say about the plausibility of this approach, but for the time being I want to point out that these distinctly semantic considerations form part of the recent defense of relativism in the literature.

However, there are also important differences between their views. Hales' conclusion is far broader and (I would argue) more in line with the traditional concerns of the relativist—foundational questions in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Kölbel and MacFarlane, on the other hand, are more explicitly concerned with a narrower set of issues largely connected to the philosophy of language. Wright has noted this 'linguistic

¹⁰ For a response to this "easy road argument" for relativism, see Glanzberg (2009).

turn' to the sorts of views defended by Kölbel and MacFarlane, which he labels *New Age Relativism*. According to Wright,

New Age Relativism presents a sober, semi-technical thesis in the philosophy of language...Traditionally, relativism about truth has been a metaphysical view, driven by ideas about the limits of the objective world, or the illusoriness of any aspiration to purely representational thought. Its re-emergence as a form of semantic theory, by contrast, has been fostered in large part by considerations about the ways in which, supposedly, relevant areas of language actually work.¹¹

One way to highlight the difference between traditional and more recent semantic varieties of relativism is by noting the sorts of claims with which theorists in each camp are concerned. While Hales argues for the relative truth of propositions such as “God exists,” or “Abortion is morally wrong,” Kölbel and MacFarlane address propositions such as “Ice cream is tasty,” or “Mary is beautiful.” Nevertheless, what I hope to show is that in spite of the differences between their views, Hales, Kölbel, and MacFarlane all face a common set of problems.

III. Relativism and epistemology

Relativists and anti-relativists alike have too often seen the philosophical task to be one of arguing for or against the logical consistency of relative truth. However, I think that this approach to the issue is misguided. As I will argue, the real difficulties with relativism arise from the epistemological rather than the logical implications of the view. We should therefore investigate the connection between alethic relativism and epistemology, a connection that I believe has been too often either ignored or paid insufficient attention.

Epistemology is in part the study of what we should believe, and what we should believe depends on our reasons. Specifically, we should believe what we have good

¹¹ Wright (2007), p. 262.

reasons to believe, and one central aim of epistemology is therefore to investigate the nature of good reasons. But to have a good reason to believe some claim means that we have a good reason to believe that the claim in question is *true*, since belief is conceptually tied to truth. If a good reason is one that justifies our belief in the truth of the claim in question, then concepts such as epistemic justification and goodness of reasons have no sense without the notion of truth. At the very least, a reason is good if it indicates the truth or probable truth of the proposition in question. Of course, our best reasons may sometimes be misleading, but my claim is simply that we cannot make sense of what it means to have a good reason for belief without some conceptual tie to the truth. Insofar as we are committed to the idea that truth is conceptually tied to epistemology, we should expect *relative* truth to maintain this connection as well. So, even if we assume that the relativist has offered a logically consistent formulation of relative truth, there still remains the task of accounting for relative truth's normative role in guiding the formation of our beliefs. Granted that belief aims at truth, what should I believe if truth is relative? And what account of the nature of good reasons can the relativist provide?

One way in which alethic relativism may raise problematic implications for epistemology is if the view entails epistemic relativism. Epistemic relativism is the view that knowledge varies according to cultures, historical periods, perspectives, etc. This is distinct from the claim that the word "knowledge" means different things in different contexts. Epistemic relativism, unlike the contextualism described above, is not a semantic thesis but an epistemic thesis that states that given a univocal meaning for "knowledge," what is knowledge in one time, culture, perspective, framework, etc. may

not be knowledge in another. Simply put, the claim is that knowledge is relative, and not that “knowledge” is relative. According to Siegel, epistemic relativism is that view that

...knowledge (and/or truth or justification) is relative—to time, to place, to society, to culture, to historical epoch, to conceptual scheme or framework, or to personal training or conviction—in that what counts as knowledge (or as true or justified) depends upon the value of one or more of these variables...So the relativist’s basic thesis is that a claim’s status as knowledge...is relative to the standards used in evaluating such claims; and (further) that such alternative standards cannot themselves be neutrally evaluated in terms of some fair, encompassing meta-standard.¹²

Assuming that knowledge is justified true belief, epistemic relativism can arise in two ways, i.e., from the truth condition or from the justification condition.¹³ First, if truth is relative to frameworks, then A may know that p while B may lack knowledge of p , since p may be true in A’s framework but false in B’s. In this case, epistemic relativism would arise due to the relative truth of p . On the other hand, epistemic relativism may arise from the justification condition. If whether a belief is justified depends on which of a number of frameworks one adopts, then whether someone has knowledge (rather than merely a true belief) will again vary. Even if truth is a non-relative affair, whether someone has knowledge would be relative because whether she has good reasons for her (absolutely) true belief depends on her framework. Hartry Field has defended a version of this kind of epistemic relativism. He appeals to the distinction between facts and values, and argues that one can be a relativist about the latter without being a relativist about the former. As he says,

...the relativism we are concerned with is a relativism as to values only, not to facts...Now, from a metaphysical-realist perspective truth is factual, not evaluative...Relativism about values does, however, include a

¹² Siegel (2004), p. 747.

¹³ See Baghramian’s (2004), p. 139, and Siegel’s (2004), p.771, footnote 2 for discussion.

relativism as to epistemological notions, such as ‘justified’: to say that a belief is justified is to evaluate it.¹⁴

For these reasons, I understand epistemic relativism as the view that the *truth/justification* of propositions is relative to frameworks. Part of my purpose is to investigate the degree to which the views of Hales, Kölbel, and MacFarlane can be characterized as a version of epistemic relativism. As will be seen, Hales is an epistemic relativistic in both senses, since he relativizes both the truth and justification of philosophical claims to perspectives. Kölbel and MacFarlane would count as epistemic relativists in the former, but not obviously in the latter sense. Despite these differences, I will explore a related set of problems facing their views. But first, it will be important for subsequent discussions to explain the most famous objection to relativism, i.e., the charge of self-undermining.

IV. Plato, Protagoras, and the self-undermining objection

The most popular objection to relativism is that the view is in some sense self-refuting, incoherent, or logically inconsistent. This objection is interesting because it is a relatively rare example of a philosophical issue that has proven to be of fairly wide interest to those outside of academic philosophy. Particularly with regard to the issue of moral or cultural relativism, it is a common dialectical maneuver for religiously informed opponents of these views to point out that the relativist’s position must itself be true only relative to its proponent’s culture, perspective, moral code, etc. The response on the part of professional philosophers to relativism is often strikingly similar, and recalls Putnam’s claim that “We all know that cultural relativism is inconsistent.”¹⁵ The general attitude on the part of many philosophers therefore seems to be that relativism can be dismissed by

¹⁴ See Field (1982), p. 562-563.

¹⁵ Putnam (1983), p. 236.

repeating what everyone already knows. However, often one cannot help but feel that the precise way in which relativism is thought to be inconsistent is left unclear. Relativists have been equally determined to show that their view is not subject to this objection, though here too the precise nature of the challenge often seems vague or misunderstood. As a result, before we can judge whether the views I will consider are guilty of this charge, we need to first understand the charge itself.

It is instructive to begin our discussion of the self-undermining objection by starting with the earliest known formulation of relativism, that of Protagoras of Abdera (490-420 BC).¹⁶ Unfortunately, we have little more than fragments of Protagoras' writings, and the little that we know of him is through the writings of other philosophers. We know from Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus* that he was the author of a work titled *Truth*, which opened with the famous dictum "Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not."^{17,18} Though the precise meaning of this doctrine of *homo mensura* ("man is the measure") has been the subject of much interpretive work, Plato understood Protagoras to be holding the view that knowledge is perception: "The appearing of things then, is the same as perception, in the case of hot and things like that. So it results, apparently, that things are for the individual such as he perceives them."¹⁹

Plato then summarizes the essence of the Protagorean doctrine in a way that many contemporary defenders of relativistic and solipsistic views would approve of, i.e., as the

¹⁶ As a historical aside, strictly speaking it is anachronistic to think that any philosopher prior to the mid-19th century would have used "relativism" to describe his or her view, since the first use of the term was not until 1865 by J. Grote in his *Exploratio Philosophica*. See Baghramian (2004), p. 11.

¹⁷ *Theaetetus* 152a.

¹⁸ Additional information about his life and works can be found in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*, Book IX, Chapter 8.

¹⁹ *Theaetetus*, 152c.

view that “as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you.”²⁰ Protagoras’ view seems to be an early version of subjectivism, in which judgments of truth and falsity are relativized to the way that things seem or appear to individuals. Plato understood Protagoras’ relativism to extend beyond mere sensory appearances, and took him to hold the view that the truth of even philosophical positions depends on the beliefs of individuals.

One major difference between Protagorean relativism and the contemporary formulations that I will consider is that unlike Protagoras who saw judgments of truth as relativized to the beliefs of individuals, recent advocates of relativism prefer to relativize the truth of propositions within specified domains to what I am broadly referring to as frameworks. The reason is that the difference between a true and a false belief is a useful one to maintain, even for the relativist. By adopting the position that every belief is true for the person holding it, the Protagorean obliterates this very plausible distinction. Saying that a belief is true now becomes a tautology, while saying that a belief is false is a contradiction. But the relativist, along with everyone else, must confront the fact that we are fallible creatures susceptible to mistakes if she hopes to offer a philosophical thesis of even remote plausibility.

Relativizing the truth of claims to frameworks rather than individuals’ beliefs restores the distinction between true and false beliefs, since it is no longer beliefs that make claims true. Rather, it is the ways that things are relative to particular frameworks that make our beliefs true or false, and we can be mistaken about what is true relative to our frameworks. Some relativists borrow a correspondence theory, and understand relative truth as correspondence to the facts according to a framework. For example, Jack

²⁰ *Theaetetus* 152a.

Meiland argues that the relativist, like the absolutist, can take advantage of this account of truth:

The relation denoted by the expression ‘absolute truth’ is often said to be that of correspondence. The relativist can make use of this type of notion and say that “P is true relative to W” means something like “P corresponds to the facts from the point of view of W” (where W is a person, a set of leading principles, a world view, or a situation).²¹

According to Meiland, although the choice of W itself is arbitrary, intellectual activity can proceed on an objective basis once we have picked some W:

The choice of presuppositions may be entirely subjective, according to the relativist. But once those presuppositions are chosen, the rest of one’s intellectual activity can be quite objective. For, given those presuppositions, certain statements will be true. They will be true for *anyone* who adopts those presuppositions.²²

By “intellectual activity,” Meiland is referring to the practice of argumentation and reason giving. As I will now show, it is precisely this claim—that the practice of epistemology and argumentation can be grounded in arbitrarily chosen frameworks—that the self-undermining objection challenges. Harvey Siegel has probably written more in the way of an articulation and defense of the self-undermining objection than any other contemporary philosopher.²³ I will therefore borrow his presentation of the self-undermining objection because I take his to be the strongest formulation, and because my own arguments against relativism intersect with his at various points.²⁴

Siegel understands the self-undermining objection to apply specifically to epistemic relativism taken to be a meta-epistemological position, meaning that the view

²¹ See Meiland’s (1977), p. 571. For a response to Meiland’s analysis of relative truth, see Siegel’s (1986).

²² Meiland (1980), p. 124.

²³ See Siegel (1984), (1987), (1999), (2004), and (2007b).

²⁴ Siegel claims little originality for his version of the self-undermining argument, taking it to be essentially that of Plato in the *Theaetetus*. I will assume this in my discussion, but the curious reader is encouraged to take a look at Plato’s dialogue, and Burnyeat’s invaluable interpretation of Plato’s *peritrope* arguments in his (1976a) and (1976b).

concerns the evaluation of epistemic frameworks and standards themselves. Since epistemic relativism concerns our knowledge-claims, and since it is itself a knowledge-claim concerning the nature of justification, standards, principles, etc., it follows that the view applies to itself. Given this reflexivity, epistemic relativism itself will be evaluated as true or justified relative to some frameworks or principles, but as false or unjustified relative to others.

So far this is not a problem. However, the relativist also denies that there is any neutral or non-circular way to decide between frameworks. This point is made in different ways. Relativists express this point by saying that “There is no metaperspective, or absolute cross-platform epistemic standard, to which we might appeal...”,²⁵ or that “There is no uniquely relevant choice of perspective,”²⁶ or that “...there is [no] objectivity across different sets of presuppositions.”²⁷ At the meta-level (the level at which we evaluate frameworks themselves), there is no absolute, neutral standard to which we can appeal in deciding between competing frameworks.²⁸ According to the relativist, all epistemic justification is possible only *internal to or relative to* some perspective or framework. If justification of our frameworks themselves is to be possible, then it must arise either from that very framework, i.e., the justification is circular, or else it must arise from some other framework having no more claim to absolute rightness than the one in question. This will be true of all frameworks, including the one occupied by the relativist.

²⁵ Hales (2006), p. 123.

²⁶ Kölbel (2004), pp. 299-300.

²⁷ Meiland (1980), p. 125.

²⁸ By “neutral,” Siegel means neutral with respect to the frameworks in question. See his (2004) for discussion.

Relativists explicitly endorse all that I have said so far. But the above points set the stage for the following dilemma. Epistemic relativism is itself either absolutely true/justified, or it is merely relatively so. If the view is absolutely true/justified, then a contradiction follows, since according to epistemic relativism no view has this status. The relativist may argue that only relativism is absolutely true/justified, but this response is blatantly ad hoc.²⁹ Once the relativist accepts the possibility that at least one position, i.e., epistemic relativism itself, can be absolutely true/justified, it is unclear why her opponent should accept her claim that there are no others.

So, the relativist must take the only remaining option and accept that relativism is itself true/justified merely relative to some frameworks, and false/unjustified relative to others. But why should this be a problem for the relativist? Unlike the first horn of the dilemma, this option is at least logically consistent. The trouble is that in accepting the mere relative truth/justification of her view, the relativist cannot see her relativism as superior to its competitors at the meta-level. In order for a position to be justified, there must be good reasons that support it. But if different frameworks assess the goodness of reasons differently with no neutral way to decide between these competing conceptions of goodness, then the very foundation of epistemology is challenged. Without solid ground to compare and assess our frameworks, anything may count as a good reason for anything else so long as it is evaluated as such by *some* framework.

According to Siegel, if relativism is true, then any position can be true/justified as long as it is judged as such relative to some framework. One task of epistemology is to test the justificatory grounds of our beliefs and claims with the help of standards. But a

²⁹ For example, Meiland briefly considers the option of arguing that every doctrine *except* relativism is relatively true, but wisely takes a different approach. See his (1980).

test that no position can fail is not a test at all. By making it possible for any view to be justified relative to some standard, relativism undermines the very idea of justification and hence nothing, including relativism itself, can be justified.³⁰ Without the possibility of offering good reasons in favor of her position, the epistemic relativist lacks the philosophical means to argue for the superiority of her view against epistemic competitors. According to the relativist's own framework, relativism is justified on the basis of reasons that are good relative to that framework. But it is equally true that absolutism, i.e., the view that there is meta-level goodness of reasons, is justified on the basis of reasons that are good from some other equally acceptable framework. Since there is no good reason at the meta-level to decide in favor of one framework rather than the other, there is no better reason to be a relativist than to be an anti-relativist. Siegel refers to this feature of relativism, whereby it lacks the conceptual resources to defend itself against rivals, as epistemic "impotence."³¹ The fact that the relativist is unable to offer good reasons in defense of his position leads to meta-level arbitrariness: Since there is no better reason at the meta-level to accept relativism than to reject it, the decision one way or another is in the most straightforward sense arbitrary.

To summarize our discussion thus far: Relativism itself is either absolutely justified, or justified relative to some framework. It cannot be absolutely justified because this would require the kind of 'cross-platform' epistemic goodness that the relativist rejects. So, it must be justified relative to some framework. But showing that relativism is justified on the basis of reasons that are good only relative to the relativist's

³⁰ This is the form of Siegel's "undermines the very notion of rightness" (UVNR) argument. See his (1987).

³¹ See Siegel (1987), (2004), and (2011). Meiland refers to this same feature of relativism as "self-vitiating." See his (1980), p. 121.

own framework cannot fulfill her aim of offering a philosophical position that is superior to meta-level competitors. The relativist must admit that the reasons in favor of relativism in one framework are no better than the reasons against the view in another. The view therefore undermines itself, since its truth would make it impossible to offer support in its favor.

The central point is that Siegel is not arguing that relativism is false or self-refuting, i.e., logically inconsistent. Nothing in the way that the view is formulated leads to a contradiction. Rather, he argues that the truth of relativism would make the view impossible to defend or argue in favor of. A defense utilizing absolutely good reasons is logically impossible, while a relativistic defense is not a defense at all, since it offers nothing that should convince one's opponent. So, epistemic relativism is self-undermining in the sense that if true, then it follows that we cannot have good reason to accept it. In the event that we do become relativists, our decision to do so must be hopelessly arbitrary, or in the words of Meiland, "the choice of presuppositions [will] be entirely subjective."³²

V. Self-undermining and non-reflexive formulations of relativism

I now want to draw out a few central points from the above discussion. First, self-undermining is an epistemic, rather than a logical problem for the relativist. As seen, the claim is not that the relativist's view is somehow logically inconsistent, but rather than if true, it would undermine our reasons for accepting it. Second, in order for the relativist's position to be self-undermining, it must be reflexive. Because the relativist's view applies to itself, whether it is true/justified varies relative to different frameworks. Self-reference is the key feature that leads to self-undermining, rather than whether the view is

³² Meiland (1980), p. 124.

global or local. Third, in order for the charge of self-undermining to be successful, the relativist must reject the notion that frameworks themselves can be neutrally compared and evaluated. It is the denial of ‘cross-platform’ or meta-level goodness of reasons that generates the problems considered. Fourth, it follows from the relativist’s denial of neutral meta-level criteria that the very notion of a good reason central to epistemology is undermined. Since the relativist has left us without any neutral way to decide between competing frameworks, no claim, including those of the relativist, can be justified on the basis of good reasons. But without recourse to good reasons, the relativist is left with no way to argue for the rightness of her view. As a result, relativism is “impotent” or “self-vitiating.” Finally, because the relativist cannot appeal to good reasons in support of her view, the decision to become a relativist cannot be a rational process. Since good reasons at the meta-level are lacking, the choice between relativism and its rivals is in the most straightforward sense arbitrary.

Although I will consider the extent to which the views of Hales, Kölbel, and MacFarlane are self-undermining, one of my primary aims is to examine how certain key features of the self-undermining objection are mirrored in non-reflexive formulations of relativism. As noted, the central feature that gave rise to self-undermining is reflexivity. But it is not a foregone conclusion that any particular formulation of relativism will be reflexive. For example, Kölbel’s view that claims regarding what is tasty are relatively true is not self-referential, and so relativism regarding the truth of these sorts of claims is not self-undermining. However, a view such as Kölbel’s’s shares other features with reflexive formulations of relativism. So, while relativism regarding taste may not be self-

undermining, these shared features generate parallel problems specifically with regard to disagreement and our doxastic and assertoric practices.

I will focus on relativism about taste, though I think that my objections generalize to any version of relativism that i) relativizes the truth of claims within some domain solely to frameworks, parameters, perspectives, contexts of assessment, standards, etc., and ii) denies that there is any way to rationally compare and evaluate our choice of frameworks, parameters, perspectives, contexts of assessment, or standards.

For example, consider the following version of relativism concerning taste predicates:

(Gustatory Relativism) The truth of claims concerning matters of taste is relative solely to the evaluative standards used to assess such claims; and further, there is no way to justify or rationally prefer one standard of taste over another. Claims concerning what is tasty vary in truth-value relative to standards that are not themselves capable of rational justification.

Clearly, this kind of relativism does not refer to itself, and so is neither logically inconsistent nor epistemically self-undermining. On this point, MacFarlane notes that

The local relativist can simply say that she is putting her thesis forward as true absolutely, grasping the horn of the dilemma that was not available to the global relativist. There is no inconsistency or pragmatic incoherence in saying, for example, that it is absolutely true that claims of taste are true only relative to judges or standards of taste. For this claim is presumably not itself a claim of taste.³³

However, I think it can be shown that versions of impotence and arbitrariness linger around this kind of non-reflexive relativism as well as more robust self-referential varieties. To see this, consider the claim that “Apples are delicious.” According to *Gustatory Relativism*, this claim varies in truth from one standard of taste to another. Relative to Peter’s standard of taste, it is true that apples are delicious, while this same claim is false relative to Jane’s different standard of taste. Imagine that Peter and Jane

³³ See MacFarlane (2014), p. 34.

disagree about the truth of whether apples are delicious, and further that both of their beliefs and assertions are true relative to their own standard of taste. Once they recognize the fact that they are both right, the next step would be for them to examine each other's standards and see whether one is rationally preferable to the other.

However, the relativist that we are considering denies that there is any way for Peter and Jane to rationally justify their standards. According to *Gustatory Relativism*, while it may not be a matter of taste what is tasty (since the truth of such claims depends on standards rather than personal preferences), it is a matter of taste (rather than rationality) which standard one prefers. However, if Peter and Jane cannot justify their standards, then they are powerless to defend their standards over competitors. And without the resources to justify their evaluative standards, they will ultimately be powerless to justify the relative truth of their beliefs and assertions. This seems to me a form of impotence, since the parties to the dispute are left without the necessary means to argue for the superiority of one standard or claim over another.

Additionally, since the choice of standards cannot be decided rationally, it is epistemically arbitrary which standard one prefers. But since the choice of standards used to evaluate the relative truth of claims is arbitrary, our beliefs and assertions (even when true) take on an arbitrary quality as well. The point worth noting is that the question of which evaluative standard we adopt is *epistemically* arbitrary, and not that it is all things considered arbitrary. We may have practical reasons for selecting one rather than some other standard. But nevertheless, with regard to epistemic considerations, we have no better reason to prefer one standard to its rival. This is a troublesome feature, since the relativist we are addressing posits different standards to explain the relative

truth of claims regarding taste, while at the same time making it arbitrary which standard we choose to evaluate a claim's truth. But arguably, if we lack good reasons in favor of any particular standard used to evaluate a proposition's truth, then we lack good reason in favor of the proposition, even when it is true. This threatens the connection vital to epistemology between good reasons and truth.

The gustatory relativist may be fine with the fact that on her view, her commitment to the truth (or falsity) of the claim that "Apples are delicious" is arbitrary. She may be perfectly comfortable with the fact that her evaluation of this claim is no more correct than an interlocutor's contrary evaluation, and that she is therefore powerless to defend her own evaluation of the matter as superior. However, the trouble for the gustatory relativist is not primarily that her relativism makes it impossible to defend her own assessments of matters of taste, but that this impotence undermines the sense of genuine disagreement. These features, whereby even non-reflexive versions of relativism threaten the parties to a disagreement with impotence and arbitrariness, compromise the very possibility of disagreement. If I have no better reason to believe or assert p rather than $\text{not-}p$, then I cannot defend my position against those taking a contrary view of the matter. After all, I must acknowledge that my own position is arbitrarily held, and that anyone disagreeing with me is equally right. Neither party to the disagreement can rightly think that the other holds a false belief that he should abandon. Assuming that one common goal of disagreement is to convince others of a false belief while defending our own belief, relativism about truth has difficulties in accounting for this. If this can be successfully shown, then even though such a variety of relativism will not be self-undermining, it will still be unable to offer good reasons in favor of the

propositions whose truth is thought to be relative. But without the ability to offer good reasons in defense of those claims taken to be relatively true, the relativist faces difficulties in reconciling disagreement with epistemic norms governing belief and assertion.

To summarize, my goal is to show that certain features of the self-undermining objection are mirrored in non-reflexive forms of relativism, and that the relativist faces considerable obstacles concerning disagreement and the norms of assertion. First, I think that the problems encountered by non-reflexive varieties of relativism are also epistemic, rather than logical. Second, the particular feature that gives rise to these problems is the relativist's denial of good reasons in favor of one standard rather than another. Third, because the relativist cannot justify one framework over another in the evaluation of the relative truth of propositions, we are left with no way to defend our belief that, say, "Apples are delicious" against someone who disagrees. As a result, there are worries that arise for disagreement and the degree to which our beliefs and assertions can be effective in persuading anyone occupying a different framework. This is a version of the charge of impotence, although here the impotence concerns our ability to defend our commitment to evaluative standards and particular claims whose truth is relative, rather than to relativism itself. Fourth, if we cannot offer good reasons in support of our beliefs and assertions, then we are faced with worries regarding arbitrariness. The worry is not that our acceptance of relativism is arbitrary, but rather that our commitment to particular beliefs and assertions whose truth is relative is arbitrary. And finally, while the impotence and arbitrariness of non-reflexive varieties of relativism does not itself cause trouble for the relativist, the way in which they undermine the sense of disagreement does.

VI. Some recent confusions regarding the self-undermining objection

If we take my above discussion of the self-undermining objection to contain Plato's central insights, then it becomes apparent that recent theorists on both sides of the debate have confused this issue. Hales is one such theorist, who misunderstands the self-undermining objection by taking it to be a logical problem that hinges on the question of whether or not relativism is formulated as a global doctrine.³⁴ According to Hales, this objection to relativism can be formulated by considering an analogy with modal logic. And just as modal logic helps us to frame the objection, it also helps us to reformulate relativism in such a way that we are able to avoid it. I will examine Hales' position in detail in Chapter 2, but for now I want to briefly comment on his approach. While Hales' analogy between relative truth and modal logic is interesting and original, it is nevertheless unnecessary for explaining the self-undermining objection, and ineffective in providing a solution. As we have already seen, the Platonic objection does not require any conceptual material from modal logic to get off the ground. The issue is not whether relativism is logically consistent or whether the position is formulated globally. Rather, the issue is whether the view is self-referential. In the case of global relativism this is inevitable, but weaker formulations may also have this feature. Since Hales restricts his relativism to what he calls "philosophical propositions," and since his own position can be stated as a philosophical proposition, his relativism is straightforwardly reflexive. And as such, it is open to the epistemological worries discussed above.³⁵

³⁴ See Hales (2006).

³⁵ I will explore a separate set of issues that arise for Hales, but see Siegel's (2011) for a response to his view that shows it to be self-undermining.

Boghossian, a staunch anti-relativist, also misunderstands the nature of the self-undermining objection. In his recent book on relativism, he briefly considers and rejects this objection, which he summarizes as follows:

The claim “Nothing is objectively justified, but only justified relative to this or that epistemic system” must be nonsense, for it would itself have to be either objectively justified, or only justified relative to this or that particular epistemic system. But it can’t be objectively justified, since in that case it would be false if true. And it can’t be justified only relative to the relativist’s epistemic system, since in that case it is just a report of what he finds it agreeable to say. If he also invites us to join him, we need not offer any reason for declining since he has offered us no reason to accept.³⁶

Boghossian then raises several objections. As he sees things, the problem with this response to the relativist arises from the “subjectivist horn” of the dilemma. Boghossian argues that from the fact that the relativist is justified on the basis of his own epistemic principles, it does not follow that he is simply saying “what he finds it agreeable to say,” and that we are therefore entitled to ignore him. On the contrary, Boghossian points out that relativism may be justified on the basis of epistemic principles that we all (relativists and anti-relativists alike) accept.

There are several problems with Boghossian’s response. First, the proponent of the self-undermining objection need not claim that epistemic relativism “must be nonsense,” since the issue concerns the epistemic standing of the view, rather than its meaning or intelligibility. We understand well enough what the epistemic relativist is claiming. Second, Boghossian’s description of a relativistic defense of relativism as “subjectivist” implies that judgments regarding truth and justification are settled by the beliefs or standards of individuals. But as I have pointed out, this Protagorean reading of relativism is not one many relativists would endorse. Rather, the more common view is

³⁶ Boghossian (2006), p. 83.

that such judgments are evaluated relative to frameworks, which may be shared by many individuals. On a related point, Boghossian is wrong to represent the advocate of the self-undermining objection as taking the relativist's defense of relativism to be a report of what the relativist finds it agreeable to say. The anti-relativist recognizes that the reasons given by the relativist in support of her view may be good relative to her framework, and are not simply reports of her personal opinions on the matter. However, she denies that the relativist has the conceptual resources to explain why her view is superior to meta-level competitors. And finally, Boghossian considers the self-undermining objection only as a response to a global formulation of relativism. But as I have argued, the primary issue is not whether the view is global, but whether it is reflexive. Boghossian responds to a caricature of the Platonic refutation, and as a result his objections have little force against the version I have recommended here.³⁷

VII. Some confusions with rival theories

Due to its long history and diverse formulations, relativism has sometimes been identified with a variety of distinct philosophical positions. One reason is that the considerations that have motivated relativism have motivated other theories as well. Like relativism, expressivism, contextualism, and skepticism are three theses that are at least in part motivated by conflicts concerning our normative utterances. However, if we are to take relativism seriously as a philosophical position, we must differentiate it from these theories. I will examine each in turn.

Expressivism is a semantic thesis according to which our normative judgments do not present a truth-evaluable content. Rather, they express attitudes of approval or

³⁷ See Siegel (2007a) for a fuller treatment of the problems with Boghossian's (2006).

disapproval.³⁸ According to the expressivist, in uttering a sentence like “Stealing money is wrong,” we do not say something that can be true or false. Instead we express our disapproval of theft as if we had said “Boo to theft!” As Ayer notes,

It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false. Another man may disagree with me about the wrongness of stealing, in the sense that he may not have the same feelings about stealing as I have, and he may quarrel with me on account of my moral sentiments. But he cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me. For in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind. I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments.³⁹

Although Ayer is primarily concerned with ethical predicates such as “right” and “wrong,” his account can be extended to utterances concerning what is tasty, humorous, or beautiful.

The literature sometimes seems to confuse or come dangerously close to confusing expressivism with relativism. For example, Baghramian seems to conflate these distinct positions when she defines subjectivism (a type of relativism) as

...the claim that the truth and falsity of judgements are relative to the beliefs, opinions and points of view of individuals—*that truth-claims are, in effect, nothing but expressions of our most cherished personal beliefs and likes and dislikes* [my italics].⁴⁰

One reason for this confusion is likely due to the fact that both the relativist and the expressivist are interested in our evaluative use of language. Additionally, the views of recent defenders of relativism such as Kölbel and MacFarlane share with expressivism a distinctly semantic quality. However, the relativist is not claiming that evaluative judgments are expressions of our feelings that are incapable of truth or falsehood. She is

³⁸ The classic defense of this view is in Ayer’s (1954), Chapter 6.

³⁹ Ayer (1954), p. 107.

⁴⁰ Baghramian (2004), p. 94.

claiming that such judgments have truth-values, but only relative to perspectives or frameworks.

Another semantic thesis sometimes conflated with relativism is contextualism, sometimes referred to as indexical relativism.⁴¹ According to the contextualist, which proposition a sentence expresses is partly determined by often-overlooked features of the context of use. On this view, a sentence such as “It is wrong to steal” really means something like “According to my culture, it is wrong to steal.” As we will see, the trouble with contextualism is that it cannot capture a sense of genuine disagreement, and relativists such as Kölbel and MacFarlane see one major advantage of relativism in the fact that it purportedly avoids this problem. But apart from the fact that labels such as ‘indexical relativism’ unnecessarily complicate an already confusing set of issues, several writers have added to the confusion by defining relativism in a misleading way. Baghramian is again guilty of confusing the issue when she presents relativism as the view that

...a statement of the form ‘A is P’, within a given domain (e.g., science, ethics, metaphysics), is elliptical for the statement ‘A is P in relation to C’, where A stands for an assertion, belief, judgment or action, P stands for (normative) predicates such as ‘is true’, ‘is beautiful’, ‘is right’, ‘is rational’, ‘is logical’, ‘is known’, etc., and C stands for a specific culture, framework, language, belief-system, etc....The relativity clause ‘in relation to C’ is often not stated explicitly but is thought to be inherent in the statement of ‘A is P’.⁴²

Boghossian makes a similar mistake by including a condition that he calls ‘epistemic relationism’ into his definition of epistemic relativism. With regard to epistemic claims, Boghossian understands the relativist to be offering the view that

⁴¹ Wright (2001) was the originator of the label ‘indexical relativism.’ Kölbel has borrowed this label in his (2004).

⁴² Baghramian (2004), p. 3.

If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of "E justifies belief B" as expressing the claim *E justifies belief B*, but rather as expressing the claim: *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B.*⁴³

The problem with these formulations of relativism is that they turn what the relativist intended to be normative assertions about what is justified, good, or beautiful into factual statements about their own frameworks. But in addition to changing the topic, this contextualist approach has the added disadvantage of making disagreement impossible. If an assertion of "Monet was a good painter" really expresses the proposition *According to my aesthetic standard, Monet was a good painter*, then one person's assertion of this sentence will not contradict another person's denial of this same sentence. This is because the content of the sentence would have shifted relative to the speakers' different contexts, and as a result, disagreement would be impossible.⁴⁴ Boghossian's mistake is that he takes judgments whose truth is thought to be relative and interprets them as elliptical expressions containing an indexical reference to the speaker. But as Wright points out in his response to Boghossian, "...it was supposed to be a major point for assessment-relativism that it allegedly provides a way of *preserving content* across variable assessments of truth-value."⁴⁵

I suspect that one reason why relativism and contextualism are sometimes conflated is that contextualism posits a kind of relativity, since the proposition expressed by a sentence is relative to contexts.⁴⁶ However, recent relativists such as Kölbel and

⁴³ Boghossian (2006), p. 84.

⁴⁴ I will revisit the question of contextualism and disagreement again in my Chapter 3.

⁴⁵ Wright (2008b), p. 383. "Assessment-relativism" is Wright's name for the view that "...in a single world the very same token claim can take different truth-values when considered in different *contexts of assessment*." See p. 380.

⁴⁶ See Rysiew (2011) for a very helpful discussion of the differences between relativism and contextualism, as well as for examples of some recent confusions in the literature.

MacFarlane are very careful to distinguish their relativism from contextualism. Contrary to the descriptions of relativism given by Boghossian and Baghramian, these writers are very careful to point out that on their views, it is not the content of sentences that varies, but rather the truth of propositions relative to different perspectives or standards.

The third view that we must be careful to distinguish from relativism is skepticism. Skepticism and relativism share a very ancient pedigree, and are a response to many of the same philosophical problems. At least as far back as Sextus Empiricus, skeptics recognized the need to explain the differences between their view and that of the relativist.⁴⁷ Unlike expressivism and contextualism, which are strictly speaking semantic theses, skepticism is an epistemological thesis that either denies the existence of knowledge and justification outright, or else remains non-committal as to their existence. Like relativism, skepticism may take the form of a global thesis regarding all claims to knowledge, or be restricted to knowledge claims within certain domains, e.g., the external world or philosophical questions.

There are a few reasons why relativism and skepticism could potentially be conflated with each other. Historically, relativists have sometimes employed skeptical lines of reasoning, while skeptics have appealed to considerations of a relativistic nature. The issue of disagreement provides a particularly illuminating example of this sort of crossover. Both the relativist and the Pyrrhonian skeptic have traditionally been interested in the effect that opposing judgments have upon the justification of our beliefs. Depending on the variety of relativism, some relativists take encounters with other individuals, cultures, perspectives, etc., to challenge our reasons for thinking that “we” (whoever we are) are right while others are wrong. A skeptical challenge is thought to

⁴⁷ See *The Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 216-219.

arise from the fact that in confronting others' ways of life, our own patriarchy, values, ethnocentrism, or scientific theories are thrown into doubt. Skeptics have also emphasized the effect of disagreement or conflicting judgments upon our claims to knowledge. For example, the Pyrronian skeptic presents a variety of modes or tropes that show several ways in which conflicting judgments can arise between thoughts and perceptions, between one perception and another, or between one thought and another.⁴⁸

The temptation to blur the lines between skepticism and relativism may also arise from the fact that one classic argument in support of skepticism may be adopted by the relativist.⁴⁹ According to *Agrippa's trilemma*, in order to decide between conflicts that arise over our beliefs and perceptions, we first need some standard or principle. In short, we need some criterion. However, the question immediately arises as to whether the criterion itself is justified. In order to justify this first criterion, a second criterion is required. But then the same challenge can be issued against this criterion as well, and so on *ad infinitum*. We may stop the regress by assuming the soundness of our first criterion, but in so doing we leave it unjustified. On the other hand, we may justify our criterion with the use of that very criterion. Unfortunately, a circular justification is illegitimate for the obvious reason that the issue concerns whether we are justified in our appeal to that criterion in the first place. The Pyrrhonian concludes that since

⁴⁸ See *The Outlines of Scepticism* and Machuca (2011) for discussion of the Pyrrhonian's view of disagreement. See also Gaukroger (1995), who argues that the Pyrrhonist's tropes are best interpreted as considerations in support of a version of relativism.

⁴⁹ See Sankey (2010), (2011), and (2012). Howard Sankey has argued that the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion is mirrored in recent defenses of epistemic relativism. However, the version of the problem of the criterion that Sankey discusses is one that was known in antiquity as "Agrippa's trilemma," and should not be confused with the modern formulation of the problem familiar from Chisholm's (1982). To avoid unnecessary confusion, I will refer to this problem by its ancient name. For discussion, see *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 20-21.

justifications all seem to end in infinite regress, arbitrariness, or circularity, we should suspend judgment.

Relativists can make use of this argument for skepticism. In order to decide between conflicting epistemic norms, we need some standard or principle. But the question will then arise as to whether the arbitrating principle is itself justified. The project of justifying such a principle will either continue *ad infinitum*, or else it will end either by dogmatically assuming the justification of the principle, or else by using that very principle to establish its own justification. According to Sankey, some relativists have concluded from this argument that

...the decision to adopt a given epistemic norm is not one that may be made on a rational basis. Nor is it possible for any particular epistemic norm to receive greater justification than any other. For all norms are equally lacking in justification...If no norm is better justified than any other, all norms have equal standing. Since it is not possible to provide an ultimate grounding for any set of norms, the only possible form of justification is justification on the basis of a set of operative norms...There is no sense in which the norms operative in one belief system possess a higher degree of justification than the norms employed in another such system...The relativist is now in a position to claim that rational justification is relative to operative norms within a belief system.⁵⁰

Although the relativist and skeptic may employ the same argument, from here their responses diverge. The skeptic concludes that since we appear unable to provide a satisfactory justification for arbitrating principles, we are unable to settle the conflicts that arise between our thoughts and perceptions. Suspending our judgment therefore appears to be the proper response to this epistemic impasse. Faced with a disagreement, the Pyrrhonist withholds belief in the rightness of either party. The relativist, on the other hand, concludes that justification and knowledge are possible, but only relative to particular communities, cultures, frameworks, etc. The relativist therefore takes a

⁵⁰ Sankey (2010), pp. 5-6.

stronger stand with regard to the existence of justification and knowledge. While the Pyrrhonist remains uncertain as to whether they exist, the relativist argues that they do, but only internal to particular frameworks. I will examine the Pyrrhonist's position in more detail in Chapter 2 as part of my critique of Hales' relativism.

VIII. Conclusion

In the following chapters, I will explore how these issues affect the work of Hales, Kölbel, and MacFarlane. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I will focus on each of their positions with regard to the matter of disagreement. Because Hales is concerned with the traditional sorts of issues that have motivated relativistic theses, I will start with a consideration of his work in Chapter 2. As we will see, Hales argues for a version of relativism based on a set of epistemic considerations. From there I will transition into the work of Kölbel (Chapter 3) and MacFarlane (Chapter 4), since they approach relativism by way of issues in the philosophy of language. Although they are motivated more by semantic than epistemic considerations, their views have implications for epistemology as well. This turn toward relativism by way of linguistic considerations is fairly new, and it is worth examining to what extent these varieties of relativism face the same sorts of problems as their more traditional counterparts. In Chapter 5, I will examine several norms of assertion, and offer some difficulties for each that arise independently of the question of relativism. Finally, in Chapter 6, I will connect the issue of disagreement to the matter of assertion, and examine some difficulties faced by all three of our relativists.

Chapter 2 - Hales and the Foundations of Relativism

I. Background

In a recent book and series of papers, Steven Hales has argued for a version of relativism that he thinks proceeds from the very foundations of rationalist philosophy.⁵¹ Hales argues that rationalists face the intractable problem of trying to justify their use of intuitions against epistemic competitors. Their ultimate inability to do so leaves us with the choice between relativism, skepticism, and naturalism. Hales then argues that relativism is the proper response to this trilemma. If he is correct, then whether some philosophical proposition is true depends on which method of inquiry, i.e., which perspective, is used. But not only does he think we are driven to this conclusion by the challenge to the very foundations of rationalist philosophy, but he also thinks that his version of relativism avoids the infamous charge of self-refutation.

As will be seen, Hales' relativism is directly concerned with the sorts of traditional issues that philosophers with relativist leanings have been interested in. Unlike Kölbel and MacFarlane, who are largely concerned with a distinctly linguistic set of issues, Hales is interested in traditional epistemological and metaphysical questions.⁵² Further, unlike Kölbel and MacFarlane's views, Hales' relativism is indisputably self-referential, and so it faces the age-old worries regarding logical coherence and self-undermining in a particularly pointed way. On the other hand, Hales shares with these theorists a common set of problems related to epistemic disagreement.

⁵¹ See Hales (1997), (2000), (2004), (2006), (2009a), (2009b), and (2012).

⁵² As Hales says in his (2006), p. 2, "Many defenses of relativism are grounded in the philosophy of language... The present approach is orthogonal to these. An underexplored and more direct path to relativism is epistemological, stemming from a recognition of rational irreconcilable methods of acquiring non-inferential beliefs."

In what follows, I will examine Hales' relativistic project, and argue that i) his view faces difficulties old and new regarding logical consistency and self-undermining, ii) his relativism encounters conceptual problems with disagreement, and iii) he has not shown that skepticism fails as an alternative response to his trilemma. My discussion in what follows will focus on a treatment of relativism and skepticism. I share Hales' distaste for naturalism, but I do not have the space here to consider this response. However, as will be seen, there will be enough of philosophical interest without it.

II. Rational intuitions and the philosophical method

In order to better understand Hales' argument for relativism, we must take a slight detour into questions of philosophical method. According to Hales, rationalist philosophy from the time of Plato onward has been characterized by the use of rational intuitions. By "rationalism," Hales refers to the meta-philosophical tradition that relies on intuitions as the primary method of gaining knowledge of distinctly philosophical questions. On analogy with sensory perceptions, the rational intuitions employed by philosophers in their theorizing are intellectual seemings of philosophical necessities. However, since the necessary truth or falsity of philosophical claims cannot be investigated empirically, philosophers have traditionally relied on rational intuitions to provide non-inferential, *a priori* knowledge. Just as we see that the cat is on the mat, we "see" that if a person can have a justified true belief without having knowledge, then justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge.⁵³

Though Hales' sense of rationalism shares a common foundation with broader traditions such as Cartesianism, it must not be confused with them. For though both the

⁵³ See Bealer (1996), Bonjour (1998), and Hales (2012). See also Chudnoff (2011a) and (2011b), who offers a defense of rational intuitions on analogy with sensory perception.

Cartesian and the rationalist in Hales' sense agree that intuitions provide foundational justification for philosophical claims, the former additionally believes that intuitions are infallible or indubitable, while Hales denies this.⁵⁴ Hales argues that rational intuitions, like sensory perceptions, provide *prima facie* justification for philosophical propositions that can be overturned by further inquiry. Though intuitions provide *a priori* justification for philosophical claims, such justification is fallible and may be defeated either by further *a priori* reasoning, or by empirical investigation. Further, since conflicting intuitions are a common phenomenon, we cannot simply take the judgments of intuition as the final word. Think here of the conflicting intuitions that many of us have between consequentialist and deontological moral theories. As a result, the beliefs generated via intuitions must be brought together and systematized by reason operating in wide reflective equilibrium.

According to Hales, the philosopher, at least in her traditional role, goes about investigating the nature of philosophical questions with the aid of rational intuitions. These intuitions are of the necessity of distinctly philosophical propositions, and candidate examples include

Knowledge is at least justified true belief.

Intended harm is morally worse than merely foreseen harm.

*Humans are composed of immaterial souls in addition to their material bodies.*⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Hales (2006), p. 39. See also Hales' (2000), and (2006), p. 33 for his arguments that the use of intuitions requires at least a modest foundationalism.

⁵⁵ Hales admits that it is difficult to draw a clear line between philosophical and non-philosophical (mathematical and empirical) propositions, and instead relies on the presentation of paradigm examples to motivate his case. Jackman (2008) has objected that Hales' use of 'philosophical proposition' is too coarse of a description, and does not adequately distinguish what such propositions have in common. I think a fair answer is partly sociological and partly methodological. First, philosophical propositions are those that philosophers investigate in the course of their professional study. When asked by a layperson what philosophy is, one reasonable response is to list the standard sorts of questions raised in a philosophy class. Second, as Hales states, philosophical propositions are those that philosophers have traditionally thought require the use of rational intuitions. At any rate, I will not press Hales on this point, and take it for granted this his method of ostension in identifying examples of philosophical propositions is adequate, at least for my purposes.

One feature that has distinguished philosophical from scientific practice is that philosophers are not interested in how things happen to be in the actual world, but rather with how things *must* be in any possible world. As Hales says, “All of these [philosophical] propositions are taken to be implicitly prefaced with ‘□.’”⁵⁶ Since we have empirical access only to the actual world, science cannot establish whether something is a metaphysical necessity, i.e., true in *every* possible world.⁵⁷ If we are to have knowledge of philosophical necessities, such knowledge must be *a priori*, and it is just such *a priori* knowledge that rational intuitions are thought to provide.

With this meta-philosophical background in place, Hales then challenges the foundation of the rationalist enterprise. Unfortunately for the rationalist, it is not only philosophers relying on rational intuitions who have made judgments about the nature of the mind, God, and sexual ethics, the results of which have also been systematized in wide reflective equilibrium. On the contrary, the philosopher’s use of rational intuitions is merely one method among many, divine revelation and the use of hallucinogenic drugs being two others that Hales discusses at length.⁵⁸ These methods may initially seem wildly dissimilar, but Hales argues that each generates basic beliefs about philosophical propositions. The Catholic Church and various shamanic traditions have investigated these same questions using alternative methods, and as Hales’ historical analysis shows, they have often arrived at inconsistent conclusions. To take one example, while the

⁵⁶ Hales (2006), p. 21.

⁵⁷ Though as Hales notes, empirical investigation can show that a purported metaphysical necessity is not in fact such by showing that the proposition in question is false in the actual world. See his (2006), p. 23.

⁵⁸ Another possibility not mentioned by Hales is Evan-Pritchard’s oft-cited discussion of the Azande’s use of a poison oracle. See Evans-Pritchard (1976), Winch (1964), and Boghossian (2006) for recent discussion.

Catholic Church and many shamanic traditions accept that humans have incorporeal souls, many (most?) rationalist philosophers would reject this idea.

Now, the fact that there are different perspectives that can be brought to bear upon philosophical questions is not surprising, and in and of itself this carries little epistemological significance. But it does leave us in a quandary, since in the case of conflicts we will want to know which method of gaining beliefs is epistemically preferable. If abortion is impermissible according to revelation, but permissible according to rational intuition, the question arises of which perspective we should use to settle the issue. We cannot simply accept the dictates of conflicting perspectives at face value, at least not if we are interested in consistency. As long as there is some neutral way to choose between competing perspectives when conflicts arise, then the fact that different perspectives yield conflicting judgments is unproblematic. Unfortunately, as we will see shortly, Hales rejects any neutral meta-perspective that could arbitrate interspectival disputes.

Hales' statement that such alternative methods produce foundational knowledge of philosophical propositions is surprising from one trained in the analytic tradition of philosophy, but he argues that we are left with no choice but to recognize the equal epistemic standing of alternative methods of inquiry. He considers several responses that the rationalist could make on behalf of intuition, but argues that each fails.⁵⁹ As a result of our inability to justify the use of rational intuitions, we are left with a choice between relativism, skepticism, and naturalism.

I will not attempt a serious defense of philosophical intuitions, but I would like to comment briefly on Hales' rather extraordinary claim. First, for divine revelation to give

⁵⁹ I will not consider Hales' arguments here, but see his (2006) pp. 78-88 for discussion.

us philosophical knowledge, God must exist. We cannot simply take the dictates of revelation as a given without good reason to think that there is Someone doing the revealing. But it seems misguided to hinge basic questions in morality, metaphysics, and epistemology upon the contentious question of whether God exists.⁶⁰ With regard to hallucinogens, given our understanding of how drugs operate upon our cognitive processes, it is incredible to claim that we have no reason to think them epistemically inferior to sober reflection. The track record of an epistemic method in empirical matters can cast reasonable doubt upon its reliability in metaphysical matters.⁶¹ Hallucinogens often produce predictably inaccurate perceptions, and this gives us reason to question their reliability in philosophical domains.

If these or other arguments can successfully show that intuitions are in fact epistemically superior to other methods of inquiry (a point I will not attempt to settle), then we will not be forced into Hales' trilemma. However, I will grant Hales this trilemma, since I think that even if he is permitted the doubtful claim that intuitions fare no better epistemically than drug use or revelation, he is still a long way from showing that his brand of relativism is the solution. As mentioned, I will not consider the question of naturalism, and will instead focus on Hales' treatments of relativism and skepticism. Hales rejects skepticism on the grounds that it is self-defeating and leads to a version of the knower paradox. I will revisit his attempted refutation later (in Section V), but in what follows I will turn to a discussion and critique of Hales' own way out of the trilemma, i.e., relativism.

⁶⁰ I assume that most contemporary philosophers would not take such a Cartesian approach seriously.

⁶¹ See Sankey (2010), who presses this point against the relativist's claim that there is no objective way to decide between the Azande poison oracle and other epistemic methods.

III. Global relativism, philosophical relativism, and modality

As we will see, Hales is ultimately interested in a limited relativism about the truth of philosophical propositions. On his account, the truth of propositions concerning God, ethics, the nature of the soul, etc. must be relativized to perspectives, which are individuated by distinct ways of knowing. In short, they are precisely the sorts of methods for gaining philosophical knowledge that we discussed in the last section. We will return to an examination of Hales' philosophical relativism, but first I will take a look at his critique of a more far-reaching variety of relativism, i.e., the claim that "everything is relative."

Hales' first move is to address the charge that global relativism is somehow self-defeating or logically inconsistent. He offers what he takes to be the problem with global relativism as it is generally formulated, and then proceeds to replace this view with his own version. However, in his discussion of global relativism, Hales appears to offer two different formulations of the view without distinguishing them from each other. I will refer to the first formulation as the possibility reading, and the second as the contingency reading.⁶² By itself, not much hinges on the fact that Hales seems to slide from one formulation of global relativism to another without making this explicit. However, I think that his positive account has problems. On the one hand, Hales explicitly wants his own formulation of philosophical relativism to mirror possibility. But on the other, his view has problems that parallel those seen in the case of the contingency reading. I will discuss each in turn.

⁶² Kölbel makes a similar point by noting the ambiguity surrounding Hales' use of "relative" and "relatively." See his (1999), where he responds to Hales' (1997).

On his first reading, which closely parallels the notion of possibility, Hales takes the claim that “everything is relative” to mean that every proposition is true relative to some perspective.⁶³ He tries to show that the trouble with this formulation arises from its similarity to the modal claim that everything is possible, i.e., that every proposition is true relative to some possible world. In the modal case, suppose that for every ϕ , $\Diamond\phi$. If we use “it is necessarily not true that everything is possible” as a substitution instance of ϕ , then it follows that “possibly, it is necessarily not true that everything is possible.” But as Hales points out, this premise together with a theorem in S5 according to which for every ϕ , $\Diamond\Box\phi \Rightarrow \Box\phi$ entails that “it is necessarily not true that everything is possible.” Thus, we have shown by *reductio* that necessarily, not everything is possible.

Hales introduces two new logical operators to show that a similar proof can be constructed against the claim that everything is relative. Just as \Box and \Diamond take propositions and index them to possible worlds, \blacksquare and \blacklozenge take propositions and index them to perspectives, where perspectives, like possible worlds, are treated as abstract intensional objects.⁶⁴ So, $\blacksquare\phi$ should be read as “it is absolutely true (true in all perspectives) that ϕ ,” and $\blacklozenge\phi$ should be read as “it is relatively true (true in some perspective) that ϕ .” Armed with this logical machinery, Hales now proceeds with his proof that for every ϕ , $\blacklozenge\phi$ (“everything is relative”) is inconsistent. Analogous to the case with modality, let “it is absolutely not true that everything is relative” be a substitution instance of ϕ . This entails “it is relatively true that it is absolutely not true that everything is relative.” The perspectival equivalent of our modal principle that for

⁶³ Hales (2006), p. 100.

⁶⁴ Hales (2006), p. 113.

every ϕ , $\Diamond \Box \phi \Rightarrow \Box \phi$ is *P*: for every ϕ , $\Diamond \blacksquare \phi \Rightarrow \blacksquare \phi$. Finally, *P* together with our substitution instance of ϕ entails that “it is absolutely not true that everything is relative.”⁶⁵ As was the case with the claim that everything is possible, we see that the claim that everything is relative ends in logical inconsistency.

However, only one paragraph later Hales interprets the global relativist’s claim that “everything is relative” to mean that “every proposition is true in some perspective and not true in another,” or equivalently that “no proposition has the same truth value in every perspective.”⁶⁶ On this interpretation, relative truth now looks more like contingent truth than possible truth.⁶⁷ Absolutism, as the negation of relativism, is then the view that “there is at least one proposition having the same truth-value in every perspective.” Hales then levels the famous dilemma against the global relativist. The claim that “every proposition is true in some perspective and not true in another” must itself be either absolutely true, or relatively true. If it is absolutely true, then there is at least one proposition, i.e., global relativism itself that is true in every perspective, in which case relativism is false. Therefore, in order to avoid logical inconsistency global relativism must be relatively true, i.e. true in some perspectives and false in others. If global relativism is false in some perspective, then absolutism is true in that perspective. But if absolutism is true in any perspective, then there is at least one proposition having the same truth-value in every perspective. Hales argues that unfortunately for the relativist, there does not seem to be any such proposition. It cannot be either absolutism or relativism, since *ex hypothesi* these propositions are each relatively true. But neither can any other candidate be successful. The reason is that regardless of which proposition we

⁶⁵ Hales (2006), p. 100.

⁶⁶ Hales (2006), pp. 100-101.

⁶⁷ This was helpfully pointed out to me by Simon Evnine, p.c.

choose, we are imagining it to be absolutely true relative to some perspective, which is to say $\blacklozenge \blacksquare \phi$. But according to P : for every ϕ , $\blacklozenge \blacksquare \phi \Rightarrow \blacksquare \phi$. It would therefore follow that such a proposition is absolutely true and relativism is false.

As can be seen in the above, P appears in both Hales' proofs against global relativism. It is this formal principle P that Hales believes captures the intuition that there is something paradoxical or contradictory with the idea that absolutism is true only relative to a perspective. But on the contrary, "absolutism resists confinement to perspectives; it insists on extending its reach without bounds."⁶⁸ According to Hales, the lesson to take from this is that the relativist should not attempt to show that global relativism is true merely relative to some perspective.⁶⁹ Rather, the relativist should rethink the way the view is formulated, and modal logic provides the key insight.

Hales argues that just as it would be wrong to conclude from the above that we should abandon talk of modality and truth relative to possible worlds, so it would be wrong to abandon relativism and truth relative to perspectives. Just as we should not say that "everything is possible," but rather that "everything true is (at least) possibly true," so we should not say that "everything is relative," but rather that "everything true is (at least) relatively true." Formulating global relativism in this way leaves open the possibility that all propositions are absolutely true, i.e., true in every perspective. Hales thinks that mathematical and logical principles (including the axioms and theorems of his own relativistic logic) are absolute truths. Thus, he takes himself to have offered a sweeping form of global relativism that avoids the charge of inconsistency. Hales notes that this compromise is not likely to be acceptable to all parties concerned. Relativists

⁶⁸ Hales (2006), p. 99.

⁶⁹ For an attempt along these lines, See Bennigson (1999).

may reject this formulation because they are uncomfortable with a global relativism that is consistent with all truths being absolute.⁷⁰ And absolutists may be uncomfortable with the idea of perspectives and the fact that many (or most) propositions may turn out to be merely relatively true. However, Hales thinks these represent reasonable concessions that each side should be willing to make.

Hales then connects his earlier discussion of perspectives and the philosophical method to global relativism. While all propositions that are true are at least relatively true, Hales argues that philosophical propositions are at most relatively true, i.e., true in some perspectives and false in others. Equivalently, no philosophical proposition is true in every perspective. Hales argues at length that different perspectives produce inconsistent results concerning the truth of such propositions, and “since [perspectives] are *basic* methods, there is no neutral ground, no independent objective source to which one might defer.”⁷¹ As a result, when perspectives conflict concerning the truth of some philosophical proposition, Hales rather shockingly states that “it is fundamentally arbitrary which perspective and attendant network of belief-acquiring methods one uses to gain philosophical beliefs.”⁷² Hales relies at key points in his argument for philosophical relativism on a rejection of skepticism, which I will consider in more detail in Section V below. Here I want to examine the consistency of his claim that philosophical propositions are true in some perspectives and false in others, and then consider a set of worries that arises from his comparison of perspectives to possible worlds. I will begin with the issue of self-refutation.

⁷⁰ For example, Kölbel takes issue with the fact that on Hales’ view, the strictest absolutist can agree that for every proposition, if it is true, then it is true in some perspective. See Kölbel (1999).

⁷¹ Hales (2006), pp. 119-120.

⁷² Hales (2006), p. 128.

A first issue is whether Hales has achieved his goal of offering a consistent account of relativism, specifically with regard to philosophical propositions. Recall that Hales concludes that philosophical propositions are at most relatively true, by which he means that they are true in some perspectives and false in others. Then he would appear to be vulnerable to the following charge of self-refutation.⁷³ The claim that “all philosophical propositions are (at most) relatively true” is itself a philosophical proposition. Hales’ philosophical relativism cannot be absolutely true on pain of inconsistency. It must then be at most relatively true, i.e., true in some perspectives and false in others. In some perspective in which philosophical relativism is false absolutism will be true. But as we have already seen, by Hales’ principle *P* whatever is relatively absolute is absolute. By Hales’ own reasoning, his philosophical relativism is therefore false.

This objection parallels that offered by Hales against what I have referred to as the contingency reading of global relativism. Recall that the trouble for the global relativist who formulates her view as “every proposition is true in some perspective and not true in another” is that in any perspective in which global relativism is false, absolutism is true. But given *P*, the truth of absolutism cannot be confined to particular perspectives, and rather spreads to all. Hales faces a parallel problem due to the fact that his philosophical relativism is itself a philosophical proposition, and as such, it must be merely or at most relatively true. But being “merely” or “at most” relatively true has the same effect as the sense of truth employed on the contingency reading insofar as both

⁷³ I will use “self-refutation” and “self-undermining” in distinct senses. I use “self-refutation” to refer to a logical problem in which relativism leads to a self-contradiction. I use “self-undermining” in Siegel’s sense in which it is taken to be an epistemic, rather than logical point about relativism’s ability to justify itself. For discussion of similar distinctions, see Morris (2008). I will pass over the self-undermining objection against Hales’ relativism, but see Siegel’s (2011) for discussion.

views allow one to reason from relativism's falsity in one perspective to absolutism's truth in another. Thus, even if Hales has offered a logically consistent formulation of global relativism on analogy with possible truth, his philosophical relativism seems to be more like the contingency reading than the possibility reading, and arguably encounters the same problem as a result. I make no claim as to whether Hales' own argument against the contingency reading is ultimately plausible. I only argue that *if* his line of reasoning is effective against that formulation of global relativism, then it should be equally effective against his own formulation of philosophical relativism.

I will now turn to a set of worries that concern Hales' analogy between perspectives and possible worlds. He states that "Perspectives themselves I propose we treat in the same manner as possible worlds, namely, as abstract intensional objects. *They are ways of knowing* [my italics]." ⁷⁴ However, it is hard to reconcile the understanding of perspectives on analogy with possible worlds with the understanding of them as ways of knowing. ⁷⁵ A possible world is supposed to be the set of all propositions true in that world, or a complete description of the state of affairs pertaining in that world. But perspectives, insofar as they are ways of gaining *knowledge*, have a normative component. ⁷⁶ Hales clearly intends for perspectives to play a justificatory role in reference to our beliefs, but taking the analogy with possible worlds seriously would mean identifying perspectives with the sets of propositions that come out as true relative to each perspective. So understood, perspectives have lost their intended normative component, but I am not sure how else we should understand them. While Hales notes that we should be careful not to deny the differences between perspectives and possible

⁷⁴ Hales (2006), p. 113.

⁷⁵ Simon Evnine (pc.) brought the following point to my attention, though I have expanded it somewhat.

⁷⁶ For example, see his discussion on p. 128 of his (2006).

worlds, my worry is whether their similarities are sufficient to allow us to make sense of relativism.

Next, recall that according to Hales' global relativism, for every ϕ , if $\phi \Rightarrow \blacklozenge\phi$. That is, if a proposition is true, then it is true in some (at least one) perspective. But what does "true" mean in the antecedent? It cannot be truth *simpliciter*, since as Hales notes, "For the relativist it will be nonsense to talk about truth outside of the structure of perspectives—that is, nonperspectival or extraperspectival truth."⁷⁷ While replacing "true" in the antecedent with "absolutely true" will make a true statement, it is clearly not what Hales has in mind.⁷⁸ And replacing "true" with "relatively true" would simply be definitional without illuminating its usage in the antecedent.

In fact, Hales here thinks of truth as analogous to actual truth. What he calls "real" truth is simply truth in this (our) perspective, just as actual truth is truth in this possible world. But what makes a proposition true in some possible world? Hales favors a correspondence theory of truth, whereby a proposition, sentence, belief, statement, etc. is true if it stands in the proper relation to facts, states of affairs, or whatever in the world. So for Hales, real truth is a correspondence between propositions and the world *as determined by perspectives*. Just as actual truth varies from world to world, "real" truth varies from perspective to perspective. The deeply counterintuitive claim of the relativist is that what is really/actually true varies from one perspective to another, and reality is not the same for everyone. For example, the claim that "God exists" is actually true in

⁷⁷ Hales (2006), pp. 102-103. Hales' perspectives bear some resemblance to Hacking's "styles of reasoning" in that both have a certain epistemic dimension, and outside of both perspectives and styles of reasoning propositions lack truth-values. The key difference is that independently of styles of reasoning not only does the proposition lack a truth-value, it is not even a candidate for truth or falsity, i.e. a proposition, at all. Unlike perspectives, styles of reasoning bring propositions into existence. See Hacking (2002).

⁷⁸ Maintaining the analogy with modal logic, "if a proposition is absolutely true, then it is relatively true" will be true on Hales' view.

the perspective of Catholic theology, but actually false in the perspective of rationalist philosophy. So, there is no answer to the question of whether God exists *simpliciter*. The truth of whether He does or not is relative to perspectives. Indeed, there is no sense in which He does or does not outside of all such perspectives.

I must confess my doubts concerning the intelligibility of this view. There is something deeply puzzling about a correspondence theory of truth that requires parameters such as perspectives, conceptual schemes, frameworks, etc., in addition to what we can broadly refer to as “the world.” Truth is intelligible when conceived as a dyadic relation between propositions and the world, an intelligibility that is lost with the addition of perspectives. When it comes to truth, three is a crowd. What does it mean to say that “God exists” correctly describes non-propositional reality *relative to one perspective*, but incorrectly *relative to another*?

In one sense, there is a perfectly straightforward way in which the truth of ontological claims may vary. If we take the term “God” to refer to different sorts of beings, then whether God exists depends on the sort of being to which we are referring. But in this case the truth of our claim does not depend on anything as controversial as perspectives. Rather, which proposition is expressed depends on which definition of “God” we use. But once we have fixed our usage, the claim that, say, “The Judeo-Christian God exists,” like any other, will be true or false depending on the way the world is. The sort of view just sketched is of course a variety of contextualism, and can be used as well to explain the relativity in play in the case of non-philosophical propositions such as “Electrons exist.” However, Hales states that his view “holds the truth bearers, propositions, as cross-perspectively constant, whereas what can fluctuate are their truth-

values.”⁷⁹ He thus explicitly rejects a contextualist account that would change the content of propositions. It is the truth-value of a fixed proposition, and not the content, that varies relative to perspectives.

The trouble with Hales’ variety of relativism is that it becomes entirely mysterious what role is still played in the determination of truth-values by the world, and by extension, possible worlds. Hales is not merely making an epistemic claim to the effect that we cannot have any access to the world or facts independently of perspectives. That is, he is not simply making (what I take to be) Quine’s rather modest point that there is no “cosmic exile.”⁸⁰ Rather, he is making the much stronger metaphysical claim that there is no way the world is independently of perspectives, “that whatever truths correspond to, facts, states of affairs, or whatever are themselves relatively the case.”⁸¹ But if the facts to which propositions correspond are themselves entirely dependent on perspectives, then the world becomes an idle wheel as far as truth is concerned. Perspectives are supposed to be ways of acquiring beliefs. But beliefs about what? According to Hales, our beliefs do not correspond to the world *simpliciter*, but rather to the world as represented by perspectives. So, perspectives turn out to be ways of gaining knowledge of the world relative to perspectives. What function does the world still serve? As Wright so nicely puts the point,

...the difficulties are especially daunting if we essay to think of truth as *correspondence*, in a robust sense of correspondence with calls for an internal relation between a proposition, conceived as an articulated abstract entity, and some correspondingly articulated aspect of non-propositional reality. On any such picture of truth and truth-conferral, it seems impossible to make room for the additional parameter which relativism posits; the internal structural relationship between propositions

⁷⁹ Hales (2006), p. 106.

⁸⁰ Quine (1960).

⁸¹ Hales (2006), p. 141.

and the things that make them true or false is so conceived as to be essentially dyadic.⁸²

Although Hales seems to place special emphasis on a correspondence theory of truth, he states that his relativism is compatible with other rival accounts without entailing any particular one. He is therefore not committed in light of his relativism to any particular account of truth. If this is indeed the case (an issue that I will not explore further), then the most that I have argued is that Hales should avoid adopting a correspondence theory. Though other relativists have also adopted a correspondence theory of truth,⁸³ it is an additional step requiring further argument to show that they *must* adopt such a theory and then face worries about the intelligibility of their view. I make no such claim, and only argue that *if* the relativist has the choice of other accounts of truth, then he should explore those instead.

Another worry that arises from Hales' modeling of relativism along the lines of modality is how these two features, i.e., relative truth and alethic modality, can be harmonized with each other. Not entirely surprisingly, Hales gives priority to perspectives, with the result that modality is itself perspectival. What is necessarily or possibly the case depends on the choice of perspective. But this raises several worries.

First, must perspectives, like possible worlds, be logically consistent, or can they contain inconsistencies? On the one hand, Hales seems to assume consistency when he infers from the premise that global relativism is false in some perspective that absolutism is true in that perspective. However, if modality is relative to perspectives as Hales believes, then what is to prevent there from being perspectives that contain contradictions? Since modality is subservient to perspectives, it cannot be used as an

⁸² Wright (2006), p. 54.

⁸³ For example, see Meiland (1977).

independent criterion. So, could it not be the case that relative to some perspective, $\Diamond(p \ \& \ \text{not-}p)$?

Hales is faced with a dilemma. If he answers that perspectives must be logically consistent, then he is treating modality as independent of perspectives. By making modality non-perspectival, Hales would then have some minimal criterion to compare and evaluate competing perspectives. However, the existence of an objective criterion stands in direct opposition to Hales' repeated statements that "there is no neutral ground, no independent objective source to which one might defer" in deciding between perspectives.⁸⁴ On the other hand, he can maintain his view that modality is perspectival, with the result that contradictions may be true relative to some perspectives. With qualification, this seems to be Hales' view. He approvingly cites Nietzsche's comment that "rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off," and remarks that

Humans cannot live without interpreting their experience in a logical way. That is, logic is essential to human life, and so the laws of logic are absolutely true *for humans*. Now, in nonhuman perspectives, whatever they may be, things could be different [my italics].⁸⁵

So, Hales' view is that logical necessities hold, not in every perspective *simpliciter*, but in every *human* perspective. To answer my earlier question, this means that a contradiction such as $\Diamond(p \ \& \ \text{not-}p)$, though absolutely false for us, may be true in some non-human perspective. I have two responses to this, the first being historical and the second philosophical. First, as a matter of historical fact, there have been perspectives that have countenanced contradictions. Consider the view of Nicholas of

⁸⁴ Hales (2006), p. 119-120.

⁸⁵ Hales (2006), p. 145.

Cusa (1401-1464), a Christian teacher who relied on the method of mystical intuition to acquire knowledge of God's nature. According to Nicholas,

Since God is absolutely without restriction, there is no quality that his nature excludes. All opposites are united in God. God exists and does not exist; he is being and not being; he is greatest and smallest; he is transcendent and immanent; he is beginning and end; he creates the cosmos from nothing, yet it extends from himself; he is unity and diversity; he is simple yet embraces all distinctions. God is a "coincidence of opposites," a union of contraries, beyond the grasp of human reason...⁸⁶

Hales cannot plausibly argue that mystical intuition is not a legitimate method of acquiring beliefs about God, since he argues that the use of hallucinogens is a legitimate method and compares drug use to mystical experience.⁸⁷ But if from the perspective of mystical intuition contradictions are true of God, then it cannot be the case that the laws of logic hold in every human perspective. The challenge to Hales does not proceed from a hypothetical case, but from an historical example. I do not conclude from this that contradictions really are true relative to various perspectives. Rather, my point is that given Hales' own view of perspectives, his claim that logical necessities are absolutely true for humans is insufficiently supported.

But for the sake of argument, let us grant Hales that matters regarding the laws of logic may be otherwise in non-human perspectives. Imagine some possible world besides the actual with creatures possessing perspectives fundamentally different from our own. Relative to one of their perspectives, some contradiction is true. But a possible world containing a contradiction, albeit one relative to a perspective, seems better described as an *impossible* world. Hales would perhaps respond that since modality is

⁸⁶ Russell (1988), p. 159.

⁸⁷ He approvingly cites Stace, who when asked whether the experience of hallucinogens was similar to the mystical experience, responded that "It's not a question of being similar to mystical experience; it *is* mystical experience." See Hales (2006), p. 76.

perspectival, whether something is a possible world varies from one perspective to another. But this opens the floodgates, with a possible world now being whatever some arbitrary perspective decides is such. If whether some world is possible is a matter arbitrarily decided by perspectives, then we lose our grasp on what a possible world is. And without this grasp, possible worlds cannot serve as an explanatory device for our understanding of modality.

Michael Glanzberg has also expressed skepticism regarding this more recent attempt on the part of theorists such as Hales to accommodate their relativism to standard semantics and possible worlds. Hales aims to show that relativizing the truth of propositions to perspectives is in no worse a position than relativizing their truth to possible worlds, but Glanzberg challenges what he calls the “easy road argument.” As he points out, it is a standard part of most pictures of possible worlds that they are *complete* descriptions of the way that things could have been. But then

“...it is hard to make sense of a world both being a complete way things could have been, and there being more than a world that could be needed to make a content true. The completeness of possible worlds makes the relativist conclusion dubious.”⁸⁸

I agree, and if we are to make sense of the relativist’s attempt to reconcile perspectives and possible worlds, then Hales needs to address these sorts of worries. However, I am not optimistic that this can be done in a way that harmonizes with standard semantics, as the relativist wants.

Just as relativizing modality to perspectives threatens our understanding of a possible world, it also threatens our understanding of necessity. In the last paragraph I asked how a world could be possible while containing a contradiction. A related question

⁸⁸ Glanzberg (2009), p. 304.

is how a proposition can be necessary while being false in some perspective. In other words, how can a proposition be necessarily true without being absolutely true, an entailment that Hales explicitly rejects?⁸⁹ Hales allows for a proposition to be true in every possible world while simultaneously false relative to some perspective within a world. Indeed, his philosophical project requires this, since philosophical propositions are supposed to be both necessarily true and false relative to some perspectives, even in the actual world. But by definition, a proposition is necessary just in case it is true in every possible world, and it is not clear how this can be reconciled with a proposition's falsity, regardless of whether this takes place in some world or perspective.⁹⁰

Finally, Hales' claim that modality is perspectival threatens his own notion of perspectives and their role in philosophical investigation. Remember that Hales takes perspectives to be ways of gaining knowledge of philosophical propositions, where philosophical propositions were themselves picked out chiefly by ostension independently of perspectives. That is, having already picked out intuitive examples of philosophical propositions, Hales then brings perspectives to bear upon the question of their truth. Although he denies that all necessary truths are philosophical propositions (exceptions being logical and mathematical statements), he thinks that all philosophical propositions have their truth or falsity as a matter of necessity.⁹¹ Necessity is a necessary condition of a proposition's being philosophical such that if something is a philosophical proposition, then it is metaphysically necessary. However, if modality is perspectival, then whether a proposition is necessary, and hence philosophical, is also perspectival.

⁸⁹ Hales (2006), p. 143, and (2008), p. 271.

⁹⁰ A further point is that Hales' own modal claim that $\Diamond(\Box\phi \ \& \ \neg\blacksquare\phi)$, i.e., it is possible that a proposition be necessarily true and not absolutely true (relatively false), is itself true only relative to his own arbitrarily chosen perspective.

⁹¹ Recall his comment that all philosophical propositions "...are taken to be implicitly prefaced with ' \Box .'"

So, the proposition “free will is incompatible with determinism” may be a necessary truth relative to one perspective, but not relative to another. As a result, such a proposition may be philosophical in one perspective, but not in another. The trouble with this conclusion is that Hales initially appeared to want perspectives to evaluate a philosophical proposition’s truth-values, and not to judge whether some proposition was philosophical in the first place.

Further, if a proposition like “free will is incompatible with determinism” is judged as philosophical in one perspective but not in another, then the content of the proposition, and not merely its truth-value, seems to have changed across perspectives. After all, if one proposition has some property (that of being necessary or philosophical) that the other lacks, then they are not the same proposition. But this contradicts Hales’ claim that propositions are “cross-perspectively constant, whereas what can fluctuate are their truth-values.”⁹²

IV. Relativism and disagreement

So far I have examined Hales’ relativism, and raised worries about the consistency of his view and the plausibility of maintaining his analogy between perspectives and possible worlds. I will now consider some challenges that Hales’ relativism raises for disagreement. In subsequent chapters, I will also consider the work of Kölbel and MacFarlane with regard to disagreement, but it is worth quickly pointing out one major difference between their approaches to this issue. As we will see, both Kölbel and MacFarlane attempt to reconcile their relativism with the intuition that people can disagree over matters whose truth is relative. While I think that they are right to take the problem of disagreement seriously, I do not think that their solutions are successful.

⁹² Hales (2006), p. 106.

Hales, to his credit, recognizes that the relativist does not have a plausible account of disagreement. Unfortunately, he does not seem to appreciate the extent to which the failure to account for disagreement is a problem for the relativist. At least, this much I hope to show.

Let us begin by taking a step back from the question of relativism, and consider our pre-theoretical intuitions regarding disagreement. As humans, we disagree on almost every matter on which it is possible to disagree. If anything, the sorts of issues that Hales takes to be the distinct domain of philosophical inquiry are of particular interest to those untrained in philosophy. One needs only to assert that God exists, or that this or that action is morally right to elicit strong responses from perfect strangers. Though most disputants may lack the philosopher's vocabulary and specific set of concerns, it seems likely that at some level we recognize that the question of, say, whether God exists comes down to the issue of truth. When two people disagree over whether God exists, they are likely disagreeing over whether it is *true* that God exists. Of course, here we must assume that they are both referring to the same thing in using the term "God." But this will often be the case, and can be taken as a matter of stipulation for our discussion.

So, if pressed to explain what they take themselves to be doing in disagreeing, our hypothetical combatants would likely recognize that their disagreement is fundamentally concerned with truth. Further, each person would likely recognize that since their beliefs are incompatible, if one of them is right, the other must be wrong. This means that, on pain of contradiction, neither of them can accept the truth of the other's belief without changing his mind about the truth of his own belief. Independently of who is actually right or wrong in particular disagreements, the above provides a quick sketch of some of

the general considerations that come into play in many of the common sorts of disagreements we are likely to encounter.

Now, how would our disputants be likely to respond to the suggestion that the truth of the proposition “God exists” is relative to perspectives, and that moreover, since they occupy different perspectives, it is true for one of them but false for the other? They can no longer take their disagreement to imply that if one of them is right, then the other must be wrong. But the possibility that both of them may hold true beliefs seems to undermine the sense of disagreement. If A and B are disagreeing, then they cannot rightly think that both of their contradictory beliefs are true. Relativism, however, allows for both parties to be right in holding contradictory beliefs, and to recognize this mutual rightness. As a result, I do not see the sense in which the relativist can preserve an intuitive sense of disagreement.⁹³

Hales agrees, and states explicitly that the relativist cannot account for interspectival disagreement. As we have seen, Hales thinks that since there is no neutral, metaperspectival criterion by which we can justify our selection of one perspective over any of the others, our “choice of perspective is ultimately capricious.”⁹⁴ Since both speakers can be right relative to arbitrarily chosen perspectives,

The conflict between A and B is merely illusory; they are in fact debating at cross-purposes. There is genuine disagreement only if both A and B adopt the same perspective with regard to [some proposition] *p*.⁹⁵

He further notes that

...it is only within a given perspective, with its network of belief-acquiring methods and evaluative strategies, that there is a way to address problems and conflicts among the data. Pointing to the fact that intraperspective

⁹³ For discussion, see Francen (2010).

⁹⁴ Hales (2006), p. 128.

⁹⁵ Hales (2006), p. 118.

there are procedures for resolving prima facie inconsistencies among the results of different belief-acquiring methods does not show that intersperspective that there is a uniform way of resolving inconsistencies. It is the problem of intersperspective conflict that seems soluble only by relativism. There is no metaperspective, or absolute cross-platform epistemic standard, to which we might appeal....⁹⁶

I find these passages puzzling. I think that Hales is right to point out that given relativism, intersperspective disagreement is impossible. Within a perspective it will be the case that if one person holds a true belief, then anyone holding a contradictory belief must be wrong. This will not be the case when the persons concerned occupy different perspectives, since it will now be possible for both of them to be right. The result now seems to be that they are not disagreeing with each other. However, in this case I fail to see how relativism provides a solution. The problem for Hales is precisely that his view makes disagreement between perspectives impossible. Cases that initially seemed to be intuitively compelling examples of disagreement between persons occupying different perspectives can no longer rightly be taken as such. So, if Hales is right, then the philosopher cannot disagree with the theologian over whether God exists, and Hales himself cannot disagree with someone occupying a perspective in which his relativism is false. But then it is unclear what Hales takes himself and others to be doing in such situations. A solution to this problem would require explaining how intersperspective disagreement is possible in spite of the above reasons to the contrary, something that Kölbel and MacFarlane at least try to do. To admit the impossibility of intersperspective disagreement is not to make this problem soluble, but rather to fail to recognize the problem in the first place.

⁹⁶ Hales (2006), pp. 122-123.

Although passages like the above indicate that Hales recognizes the impossibility of disagreement between perspectives, in other places he seems to take the view that interspectival disagreements are possible, though irresolvable. For example,

I have argued, however, that there is no way in principle for peyote-consuming shamans and rationalist philosophers to settle their differences. Their disagreement is far more fundamental: they disagree about how to acquire the noninferential beliefs upon which their systems are based. An unlimited amount of fair-minded reasoning will not produce convergence, since the disputing parties cannot agree about the data upon which reason is to operate, and there is no supraperspectival way to set the data.⁹⁷

Clearly, there is a difference between claiming that interspectival disagreement is impossible, and claiming that it is irresolvable. Further, I think that Hales should stand by his initial claim that interspectival disagreement is impossible, given his relativism. If Hales' relativism is correct, then both parties can be right in holding contradictory beliefs. But if both are right, then they are not contradicting each other, and holding contradictory beliefs seems a necessary condition of disagreement. Further, how can the parties involved take themselves to be having a disagreement once they recognize that it is possible for both of them to be right? If they are genuinely disagreeing with each other, then they can take themselves to be having a disagreement. But once they recognize that both their beliefs are correct, they cannot take themselves to be having a disagreement. Either relativism or genuine disagreement must go.

There is an important distinction to draw between intuitive cases of irresolvable disagreement, and the sort with which Hales is concerned. For example, we may disagree about whether the number of stars in the universe is even or odd, and that disagreement may be irresolvable because there is no practical way of knowing which of us is right. We know that since our answers are inconsistent, at most one of us can be

⁹⁷ Hales (2006), p. 125.

right while the other is wrong. Unfortunately, since we cannot arrive at the truth about this matter, there is no way for us to know who is right and who is wrong. However, this is relevantly different from Hales' view. He does not think that the dispute over whether God exists is such that one of us is right and the other wrong, though we do not know who is who and cannot find out. Rather, he thinks that relative to different perspectives, one of us *knows* that God exists, and the other *knows* that He does not. Further, we are fully able to recognize this state of affairs. The thought that relativism makes disagreements irresolvable stems from Hales' claim that there is no objective criterion to choose between perspectives. It is because we cannot objectively justify our choice of perspectives that we cannot settle our differences, with the result that disagreements are irresolvable.

This claim is problematic. On what grounds can Hales maintain that fundamental disagreement is irresolvable once he has accepted that both parties have *knowledge* of the disputed proposition? At that point, what more could be necessary to resolve the disagreement? It strikes me that a disagreement between two persons, both of whom have knowledge, is not a case of irresolvable disagreement. But then, if they both have knowledge and hence true beliefs, it does not seem to be the case that they are disagreeing either. Or if they are disagreeing, what forms the substance of their disagreement? They cannot be disagreeing over whether God exists relative to each other's perspective, since *ex hypothesi* neither of them is in error concerning what is true relative to his own perspective. And they cannot be disagreeing about which of their perspectives is superior, since Hales' unequivocal answer is that no perspective is superior. Rather, as we have seen, one's choice of perspective is arbitrary. If the choice

of perspective is arbitrary, then it is also arbitrary whether or not God exists, and whether or not we believe that God exists. Since there will be no better reason to favor a perspective in which this claim is true than one in which it is false, it is unclear what is left to form the substance of genuine disagreement. Disagreement seems possible, and not merely resolvable, only where parties to the dispute can evaluate and compare each other's frameworks or perspectives.⁹⁸

If the above discussion is successful, then we have reason to be skeptical of Hales' treatment of disagreement, equivocal as it is. We will now turn to a consideration of Hales' thoughts on skepticism, which form a large part of his motivation for accepting relativism. As will be seen, we have reason to be skeptical of Hales' treatment of skepticism.

V. A return to skepticism

I will now argue that Hales has not offered adequate reasons to reject the skeptical conclusion, and that when properly understood, skepticism is the most reasonable response to the trilemma for philosophical knowledge. Two points are worth noting. First, I will not argue that the version of skepticism I will recommend is reasonable *tout court*. Though I am sympathetic to the view defended here, I am unsure of its merits outside of the present philosophical context. Second, I will leave Hales' trilemma itself largely unchallenged, though I am by no means convinced by his arguments for it.

⁹⁸ I will have more to say about the question of skepticism in the following section, but for now I would like to mention the fact that Sextus addresses the question of irresolvable disagreements, and concludes that in such cases, since we cannot decide who is right or wrong, we are well-placed to suspend judgment (See *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 165). However, we should understand Sextus to be making an epistemic, rather than a metaphysical claim. His point is not that such disagreements are unresolvable, but that up till now they appear to be so. The possibility that they will be resolved in the future remains open. See Machuca (2011) for discussion. Assuming that we can correctly think of the sorts of cases discussed by Hales as disagreements in the first place, it strikes me as more reasonable to abandon the dispute once it appears unresolvable, than to continue to press the matter after realizing that there is no possibility of discovering anyone's error, as Hales does.

While Hales states that he does not want to commit himself to any particular theory of skepticism, his arguments for relativism rely at key points on understanding skepticism as arising from epistemic luck. Knowledge requires that we have good reasons to believe the things we do, but if our true beliefs are based on mere luck or coincidence and could just as easily have been false, then we do not have knowledge. We are well acquainted with this variety of skepticism from endless discussions of the whereabouts of Brown, and papier-mâché barns scattered across the countryside. Hales considers such a skeptic's response to the problem of perspectives. Given the fact that we are unable to justify our use of rational intuitions above revelation or hallucinogens, we do not know which perspective is the right one to decide the truth of philosophical propositions. Lacking a principled way to choose, it would be entirely a matter of luck if we happened to land upon the right perspective. Thus, we cannot have knowledge of philosophical propositions, since our choosing the right perspective would be entirely a matter of good fortune. So, argues this skeptic, *contra* Hales there is no knowledge of philosophical propositions.

Hales responds that the skeptic's position is too strong, and is in fact self-defeating, a conclusion he reaches with the following argument.

Argument 1:

- (1) If skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, then we can't know the truth of any philosophical proposition. (Definition of skepticism)
- (2) Skepticism is a philosophical proposition. (Premise)
- (3) Therefore, *p*: if skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, we can't know it. (From 1 and 2)⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Hales (2006), p. 92.

Hales' point is that the skeptic's position is self-defeating because if it is true, then it is unknowable.¹⁰⁰ But even worse for the skeptic, Hales offers a second argument to show that even the conclusion of the first argument is unknowable.

Argument 2:

- (1) If skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, then we can't know the truth of any philosophical proposition. (Definition of skepticism)
- (2) *p* (from *Argument 1* above) is a philosophical proposition. (Premise)
- (3) Therefore, if skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, then we can't know that *p*. (From 1 and 2)¹⁰¹

With this pair of arguments, Hales takes himself to have shown not only that skepticism regarding philosophical propositions is unknowable, but also that we cannot know that we cannot know it. And this in spite of the fact that we have just proven these conclusions!¹⁰² If successful, Hales has presented us with a strong case against skepticism. However, I think there is a problem with these arguments. The central worry is that Hales does not give adequate consideration to other formulations of skepticism, in particular that of the Pyrrhonian. While he claims that the above arguments work "regardless of how we analyze skepticism, whether we understand it to involve accidentally true belief as presented above or in some other way,"¹⁰³ this statement seems too hasty. The Pyrrhonian recommends a formulation of skepticism different from that rejected by Hales, and one that is not motivated by epistemic luck. The prospect for

¹⁰⁰ Hales' claim that skepticism is "self-defeating" proceeds from the view's self-referential nature. Recall my argument in Section III that Hales' own philosophical relativism faces a similar worry about self-defeat due to its self-referential nature.

¹⁰¹ See Hales (2006), p. 93.

¹⁰² Hales goes so far as to say that the assumption of skepticism leads to a version of the knower paradox, a self-referential sentence according to which, (G) Sentence G is not known to be true. By *reductio*, we can show that (G) must be true. However, in this case (G) cannot be known to be true, even though we have just proven that it is! Hales argues that skepticism is self-defeating in precisely this sense: if it is true, then we cannot know that is it.

¹⁰³ Hales (2006), p. 92.

showing skepticism to be self-defeating looks less promising once we consider this variety instead.

According to Sextus Empiricus, the skeptic's position should not be formulated as the view that we cannot have knowledge of some matter. Rather, the skeptic suspends judgment about whether he has knowledge, or whether knowledge is possible. Unlike dogmatic skeptics who make judgments concerning the nature of things in themselves, the Pyrrhonian is careful to pronounce only on the nature of appearances, all the while acknowledging that things may be otherwise: "We report descriptively on each item according to how it appears to us at the time."¹⁰⁴ By restricting his judgments and beliefs to appearances, the Pyrrhonian aims for the suspension of judgment and the mental tranquility that follows the cessation of philosophical theorizing.

To further these aims, the Pyrrhonian offers several forms of argument, i.e., modes or tropes. The dialectical procedure utilized by each mode is to set things in opposition to each other, whether they are beliefs, reasons, appearances, standards, or whatever. Since (so far as we can tell) there is no way to distinguish which alternative we should adopt, the Pyrrhonian advises us to suspend belief.¹⁰⁵ Contrary to Hales' formulation of skepticism in which epistemic luck entails that we *cannot* know, the Pyrrhonian is content merely to point out that given conflicting beliefs that appear to be equally well-supported, we should suspend belief. While refusing to form a belief will prevent a person from having knowledge, it will not entail the stronger conclusion that knowledge is impossible.

¹⁰⁴ *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 5.

¹⁰⁵ *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 190.

Hales briefly considers the Pyrrhonian's position, but objects to this non-committal approach to epistemology.¹⁰⁶ The Pyrrhonian may try to escape the self-referential nature of his view by denying that it is itself a philosophical proposition. Rather than defending some thesis or proposition, the Pyrrhonian may simply confine himself to showing what follows from or is entailed by the premises accepted by his *opponent*: "I am not asserting anything. Rather, I am simply pointing out that given *your* premises, it follows that you do not know."¹⁰⁷ However, Hales responds that either the Pyrrhonian is defending some proposition, or not. If he is not making any assertion or defending any epistemic position, then there is nothing meriting a response and such a skeptic can be safely ignored. On the other hand, if he is defending some proposition, then he must face the fact that his view is self-defeating.

But this response raises some worries. The sense in which the Pyrrhonian takes a stance is somewhat nuanced, and it does not strike me that Hales has done the groundwork necessary to show that the skeptic runs the risk of self-defeat in taking a stance. As Sextus notes, the skeptic refuses to affirm or deny anything, if we take affirmation and denial to mean "that objects are in their nature such as to move us necessarily" to affirmation or denial.¹⁰⁸ Rather, the skeptic's affirmations and denials concern the appearances, or the way that things seem to the person presently considering the problem. This may raise what I take to be Hales' worry that the skeptic whose assertions are simply the expressions of her own idiosyncrasies, what she knows or does

¹⁰⁶ Hales (2006), p. 93.

¹⁰⁷ The careful objector may here ask whether the Pyrrhonian knows *this*, i.e., that given his opponent's premises, it follows that he does not know. In response, the Pyrrhonian can consistently maintain that given his opponent's premises, it does not *appear* to be the case that he has knowledge, all the while admitting that suspension of judgment on this point may be necessary.

¹⁰⁸ *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 193.

not know, has not really entered the debate. But the skeptic's purpose here seems to be not so much that we take a position and articulate and clarify its central tenets. Rather, her intention is to bring attention to the need for a change in attitude, a shift in the way that we approach our beliefs and belief systems. What the Pyrrhonian has done is to point out the need to approach our beliefs with less certainty and dogmatism, to hold our beliefs more gently and with a greater willingness to relinquish them when we are confronted with reasons against them that appear equally convincing. The Pyrrhonian has not abandoned the taking of all stances. Rather, she has called for a reevaluation of the *way* in which we relate to the stances we take. The central idea is that we should avoid holding our beliefs dogmatically. While this approach to how we should relate to various positions is itself a position taken, it is one taken lightly.

While there may be worries about the coherence of the Pyrrhonian's position, I do not think that Hales has shown anything so strong as that such a position is a version of the knower paradox and therefore self-defeating. His arguments may work well against a dogmatic version of philosophical skepticism that denies the possibility of knowledge, but they do not gain traction against the Pyrrhonian. Hales generalizes from the fact that a certain version of skepticism is unworkable to the much stronger conclusion that skepticism itself is unworkable. But as I have argued, such a move is unwarranted.¹⁰⁹

Hallie has commented on this attempted refutation of Pyrrhonism:

A common "refutation" of Scepticism involves pointing out that there is a contradiction at its heart: it says that no knowledge is possible, but at the same time affirms that *this* knowledge (that no knowledge is possible) is both possible and actual. The usual way that Sextus meets this

¹⁰⁹ Bueno (2008) has also pointed out that Hales' charge of self-defeat does not work against the Pyrrhonian. Hales has acknowledged this, but nevertheless maintains his rejection of skepticism primarily because he rejects the idea that the Pyrrhonian does not take an epistemic position. See his response to Bueno in his (2008).

“refutation” is to point out that the Sceptic never says that no knowledge is possible—he simply suspends judgement, letting the conflicting claims fight it out amongst themselves. He is not claiming to know anything about the possibility of knowledge—he is simply exhibiting conflicts...The “contradiction at the heart of Scepticism” dissolves, or at least must be found elsewhere....”¹¹⁰

But perhaps Hales’ worry about the coherence of the Pyrrhonian stance can be reworked. Rather than claiming that such a position is unknowable, Hales could perhaps construct something like the following argument that at least meets the Pyrrhonian on his own terms.

Argument 3:

- (1) p : If the reasons for a proposition appear to be as good as the reasons against it, then we should suspend judgment. (definition of Pyrrhonism).
- (2) The reasons for p appear to be as good as the reasons against p .
- (3) Therefore, we should suspend judgment about p .

The worry is that we have shown that the Pyrrhonian may have to acknowledge the necessity of suspending belief even about his skepticism. If Pyrrhonism is true, and if the Pyrrhonian encounters arguments against his position that appear just as plausible as those in favor of it, then he should suspend judgment about his Pyrrhonism itself. However, if this shows Pyrrhonism to be self-defeating, it does so in a different way than Hales’ arguments. Though the conclusion of this argument does not prescribe an epistemic attitude that is inconsistent with the Pyrrhonian’s stance, it may seem to place him in an awkward position, since by his own lights he should suspend judgment about his skepticism. To what extent should the skeptic find this conclusion troublesome?

Sextus makes it clear in several passages that the Pyrrhonian anticipated this kind of objection. For example, he notes that the Pyrrhonian philosopher does not take a

¹¹⁰ See Hallie’s footnote 5 on p. 83 of *Empiricus* (1985).

dogmatic position even with regard to his own skepticism.¹¹¹ The skeptical formulae act as a kind of intellectual purgative for the cure of philosophical dogmatizing:

In the case of all skeptical phrases, you should understand that we do not affirm definitely that they are true—after all, we say that they can be destroyed by themselves, being cancelled along with what they are applied to, just as purgative drugs do not merely drain the humours from the body but drive themselves out too along with the humours.¹¹²

So, it is not clear whether this is ultimately a problem for the skeptic. Some will doubtless be uncomfortable with this conclusion. However, I think that there is something commendable about a theory that has built in measures for when the theory itself should be suspended. The Pyrrhonian advises caution with regard to all of our beliefs, since any of them, including the skeptic's own beliefs, may be false. We can understand the skeptic to be taking a stance regarding human fallibility. On this reading, the skeptic is simply calling attention to the fact that we are fallible, and that our fallibility extends even to itself. As Evnine has pointed out, rationality requires in part a modest acknowledgement of this fallibility.¹¹³ This modesty is best captured by

(Reflexive Unreliability) Some of one's beliefs may be false.

According to Evnine, (RU) refers to itself without potential paradox, since there is nothing especially problematic about the modest acknowledgement that even (RU) may be false. This schema nicely captures the skeptic's thought that our fallibility may extend even to our fallibilism, and that the skeptic's own beliefs may be false. Further, the statement that any of our beliefs *may* be false harmonizes well with the skeptic's non-committal stance regarding the truth or falsity of beliefs. So, more needs to be said to show that the reflexive nature of the Pyrrhonian's position causes problems. However,

¹¹¹ *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 13-15.

¹¹² *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 206.

¹¹³ Evnine (2001).

even if it can be convincingly shown that this is a problem for the skeptic, it is worth noting that it is a very different problem from the one raised by Hales. Suspending belief about one's skepticism may make the skeptic's position unknown, but it certainly does not entail that it is unknowable. And the Pyrrhonian at least is quite comfortable forgoing the pretensions of knowledge, even concerning his skepticism.

But not only does the Pyrrhonian escape Hales' charge of self-defeat, there are arguably problems encountered by Hales' relativism that do not arise for the skeptic. Skepticism and relativism are sometimes confused with each other, no doubt in part due to the fact that both positions are motivated by the difficulty of justifying our epistemic norms.¹¹⁴ According to Sextus, the attempt to settle disputes concerning the correct criterion or standard of truth results either in an unjustified assumption, an infinite regress, or circular reasoning (what he refers to as the "reciprocal mode").¹¹⁵ Sextus presents the difficulty for dogmatically minded philosophers in the following passage:

In order for the dispute that has arisen about standards to be decided, we must possess an agreed standard through which we can judge it; and in order for us to possess an agreed standard, the dispute about standards must already have been decided. Thus the argument falls into the reciprocal mode and the discovery of a standard is blocked—for we do not allow them to assume a standard by hypothesis, and if they want to judge a standard by a standard we throw them into an infinite regress. Again, since a proof needs a standard which has been proved and a standard needs a proof which has been judged, they are thrown into the reciprocal mode.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ As mentioned, Sankey argues that the following classic Pyrrhonian argument for skepticism parallels more recent arguments for epistemic relativism. See Sankey's very helpful discussion in his (2010), (2011), and (2012).

¹¹⁵ See *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 165-169. The Pyrrhonian uses the following trilemma (sometimes referred to as *Agrippa's trilemma*) as a general objection to all attempts to justify one appearance (perceptual or otherwise) over another, though here I will employ it specifically with regard to the matter of perspectives or frameworks.

¹¹⁶ *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 20.

We can adjust this argument to talk of perspectives, since perspectives for Hales have the epistemic function of a standard or criterion. Both the skeptic and the relativist start with the recognition that there are different perspectives that license different, and often contradictory, judgments. Both recognize the problem of justifying the choice of one perspective over another. However, from here their responses diverge. The Pyrrhonian concludes that we ought to suspend judgment about which perspective is preferable, since all attempts to demonstrate the superiority of one over another end either in an infinite regress, an unjustified assumption, or circularity. The skeptic does *not* conclude that such a justification is impossible, but only that so far he sees no way to provide one given the unacceptable nature of our options. The relativist, on the other hand, takes what the skeptic considers to be a dogmatic stance on this issue, and accepts knowledge, truth, and justification relative to perspectives.¹¹⁷ As we have already seen, Hales takes justification to be a local affair that can only be attained *within* the context of some perspective or other, without any way to objectively decide *between* perspectives themselves.

Faced with the choice between an unjustified assumption, an infinite regress, or a circular justification, Hales accepts the latter. He argues that while the use of rational intuitions must be justified on the basis of rational intuitions, other perspectives are in the same position: the justification of each perspective relies on the method of inquiry operative within that perspective. For example, concerning Christian revelation, Hales approvingly cites Jaspers comment that “The truth of revelation is established only by

¹¹⁷ See *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 216-219 for Sextus’ discussion of how Pyrrhonism differs from the relativism of his day, i.e., Protagoreanism.

revelation itself.”¹¹⁸ The issue of circular justification is a tricky one, with even a staunch anti-relativist such as Boghossian defending a certain form of this view.¹¹⁹ But difficulties aside, I think that the more pressing worries for Hales concern his appeal to circular justification rather than circular justification itself.

One worry is that there is not good reason to think that perspectives in general are justified this way. While Hales may be able to make a case for the circular procedure necessary to justify rational intuitions and divine revelation, things are less clear in the case of other perspectives. Hales does not offer any reason to think that the use of hallucinogens is justified by reliance on that very epistemic procedure, let alone offer a good reason to think that *all* perspectives are circularly justified.

Further, his claim that perspectives are justified circularly seems at odds with his many statements to the effect that the choice of perspectives is “fundamentally arbitrary” and that “there is no justifiable way to select one perspective over another.”¹²⁰ If (as Hales thinks) perspectives are circularly justified, and if circular justification is an acceptable method for justifying our perspectives, then our choice of perspective is not arbitrary, but rather is founded on good reasons. Additionally, if (as I think is the case) Hales is right that the choice of perspective is ultimately arbitrary due to the fact that there is no neutral meta-perspective from which to evaluate perspectives, then he has lost the ability to show that justification still exists internal to perspectives. As already seen, this is the upshot of the traditional self-undermining argument against relativism.¹²¹ Simply put, if there is no neutral meta-criteria to justify perspectives themselves, then

¹¹⁸ Hales (2006), p. 53.

¹¹⁹ See his defense of “norm circularity” in his (2006).

¹²⁰ Hales (2006), p. 128.

¹²¹ See Siegel (2011).

there is no possibility of justifying our beliefs within perspectives.¹²² Meta-level arbitrariness leads to ground-level arbitrariness. As above so below.

VI. Conclusion

If the preceding arguments are successful, then they offer us reason to think that Hales' relativism is an unsatisfactory response to the difficulty of justifying our fundamental epistemic principles. While I do not claim that any one is decisive in isolation, I think that together they sketch some serious worries for the relativist that arise from several different angles. Hales' relativism faces troubles arising from logical consistency and self-undermining, modality and possible worlds, and disagreement. Part of my intention has been to argue that one version of skepticism, that of the Pyrrhonian, looks far more attractive in contrast. Whether skepticism is all things considered a preferable response to the difficulties encountered in justifying our epistemic methods is a matter I will not comment upon. However, as I have tried to show, it is at the very least preferable to Hales' relativism.

¹²² As testament to his misunderstanding of the traditional self-undermining objection, Hales accepts the completely arbitrary nature of his relativism, but nevertheless takes himself to have answered the 2,500 year old charge that such a view is self-undermining. But as Siegel (2011) shows, the fact that Hales' relativism leads to arbitrariness is precisely what makes it self-undermining.

Chapter 3 - Kölbel's Relativism and the Possibility of Faultless Disagreement

I. Background

In the last chapter, part of my response to Hales addressed the trouble that relativism raises for the possibility of disagreement. There I pointed out that Hales seems uncertain as to whether he thinks that relativism makes disagreement impossible, or whether it only makes disagreements rationally unresolvable. In certain moods, Hales seems to agree that interspectival disagreement is impossible, although he does not seem to recognize the extent to which this is a problem for his own view. Matters are different in the cases of Max Kölbel and John MacFarlane, who take the issue of disagreement more seriously and attempt to show that relativists can offer a satisfactory account consistent with their relativism. In this chapter, I will consider the work of Kölbel.

To begin, we may notice that among the various topics over which people disagree, some cases of disagreement seem to imply that one of the disputants is in error while other cases may not. An argument concerning the amount of money in my bank account can admit of at most one right answer. In this case, rightness is a 'zero-sum' affair in the sense that my being right about the matter implies that anyone who disagrees with me is wrong. Other topics, however, seem to support the idea that some disputes may be faultless in that people can disagree without either of them being guilty of believing something false. For example, I may disagree with a friend over whether Nicholas Cage is a good actor. Here, we may not be so quick to accept the idea that my being right implies that my friend is wrong. On the contrary, some may have the

intuition that my friend and I can disagree about whether Cage is a good actor without either of us holding a false belief.

Some recent theorists have attempted to motivate various relativistic theses from cases of so-called faultless disagreement. Kölbel in particular has been a prominent advocate for the link between faultless disagreement and relativism, particularly with regard to predicates of personal taste and aesthetics.¹²³ Contrary to philosophers who believe that truth entails objectivity (in a sense to be explained shortly), Kölbel favors a metaphysically neutral view of truth for our semantics. By detaching truth from objectivity, Kölbel aims to offer an explanation of the possibility of faultless disagreement. In what follows, I will examine Kölbel's account of faultless disagreement and challenge its connection to relativism. Specifically, I will argue that i) rather than explaining the possibility of faultless disagreement, Kölbel's relativism actually makes such disagreement impossible, and ii) there is a plausible sense of faultless disagreement distinct from Kölbel's that does not rely on a controversial kind of relativism.

II. Truth, (non)objectivity, and faultless disagreement

Kölbel begins with a discussion of truth-conditional semantics, which he describes as the view that “it is advantageous to characterize the meaning of a sentence (or at least the central element of its meaning) by giving the condition under which the sentence would be true.”¹²⁴ Central to this theory is the notion of the compositionality of meaning, or the idea that the meaning of compound expressions depends on the meanings of their constituent parts and the rules of formation for the language. In short, analogous

¹²³ Though he suggests that other candidate topics for faultless disagreement include claims in ethics, probability, and epistemology. See his (2002), (2003), (2004), (2008a), and (2009).

¹²⁴ Kölbel (2002), p. 1. Kölbel offers a more comprehensive discussion of truth-conditional semantics, but a quick sketch will be sufficient for my purposes since I am only trying to set the stage for what he takes to be the major difficulty with this theory.

to standard treatments of formal languages, the truth-conditional semanticist treats natural languages as having axiomatic structure.

However, Kölbel points to a difficulty for this theory. According to Kölbel, truth-conditional semanticists presuppose that the content of every sentence is capable of being evaluated for truth or falsity. This seems reasonable for sentences such as “Everest is the tallest mountain on Earth,” but what is such a theorist to make of sentences such as “Bach is better than Beethoven,” “Salsa is delicious,” or “Lying is morally wrong”? Kölbel’s point is not to question whether moral or aesthetic claims are truth-evaluable, but rather to argue that their truth does not entail objectivity. To this end, he offers a semantic account of truth that he intends to be metaphysically neutral with regard to these sorts of issues. This may strike many as odd, since we often think of truth and objectivity as going hand in hand. For a sentence to be true means that it somehow describes or corresponds to reality or the world as it is independently of minds. Kölbel accepts that many claims are truth-evaluable in this sense. The sentence “Everest is the tallest mountain on Earth” concerns an objective matter, and as such its truth depends on the way that the world is. But with regard to non-objective (or “discretionary”) claims about which many deny the existence of corresponding facts, Kölbel says that their truth depends on standards or perspectives.

Kölbel uses disagreement to explain the difference between objective and non-objective domains of discourse. In the case of a disagreement about the height of Everest, we have a strong intuition that one of the parties to the dispute must be mistaken. It cannot be the case that both the person who affirms and the person who denies that Everest is the tallest mountain are right. However, Kölbel thinks that things stand

differently in the case of sentences concerning matters of taste. Here, our intuition is much weaker than a disagreement over whether salsa is delicious implies that one of the parties to the dispute is in error. The nature of the disagreement therefore sheds light on what it means for the truth of a claim to be non-objective. According to Kölbel, a content p is non-objective just in case disagreement over p does not indicate that anyone is in error.¹²⁵ Similarly, a content p is objective just in case disagreement over p indicates that someone is in error. So, for example, since a disagreement over whether salsa is delicious concerns a non-objective domain, neither party to the disagreement need be in error.

Kölbel then connects this definition of objectivity to the notion of faultless disagreement, according to which

A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker A, a thinker B, and a proposition (content of judgment) p , such that:
 (a) A believes (judges) that p and B believes (judges) that not- p and
 (b) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault).¹²⁶

The first condition clarifies what it means for something to be a disagreement. As can be seen, Kölbel characterizes disagreement as cases in which the parties hold contradictory beliefs. Further, disagreement requires that the proposition forming the substance of the disagreement must be the same for both parties. This forms the basis of Kölbel's reasons for rejecting contextualism, to be discussed shortly.

The second condition explains the notion of faultlessness. On Kölbel's view, in order for a disagreement to be faultless, it must be the case that neither person has made the mistake of believing something that is false. We can now see the way in which Kölbel connects faultless disagreement, non-objectivity, and relative truth. Non-

¹²⁵ Kölbel (2002), p. 22.

¹²⁶ Kölbel (2003), pp. 53-54.

objective contents are those over which persons can faultlessly disagree, since the disagreement does not indicate evidence of the presence of anyone's error. This is because, as Kölbel will ultimately argue, the truth of such non-objective contents is relative to perspectives or standards.

Kölbel appeals to our pre-theoretical intuitions that some cases of faultless disagreement are possible in some domains, rather than the idea that all disagreements within some domain are faultless. The mere fact that a disagreement arises concerning some non-objective domain of discourse is not sufficient to show that the disagreement is faultless. For example, if A and B disagree about whether vegemite is tasty only to find out that one of them has confused vegemite with something else, then the disagreement is not faultless. Faultlessness requires that there is "nothing either of them could learn that would make it recommendable for them to change their mind."¹²⁷ However, not everyone will accept even this fairly modest claim that *some* disagreements are faultless. I will discuss his relativism shortly, but for now I want to say a quick word about his characterization of faultlessness and the related notion of objectivity.

An initial problem is that Kölbel has offered a flawed account of what it means to be at fault. Kölbel takes being at fault and believing what is false to be synonymous. However, as I will argue, this is a serious misunderstanding. One may believe what is false without being at fault, and one may be at fault without believing what is false.

Further, Kölbel has defined objectivity in such a way that he is able to get faultless disagreement too easily. The existence of faultless disagreement requires argumentation, and not a definition of objectivity that entails it. However, Kölbel has simply built the notion of faultless disagreement into his account of what it means for

¹²⁷ Kölbel (2003), pp. 54.

some content to be (non)objective, and so it is no surprise that if we accept his account of objectivity, we are also committed to faultless disagreement. Since non-objective domains are simply those in which disagreement can be faultless (no one is in error), his definition of objectivity presupposes faultless disagreement, rather than offers independent support for it. So, non-objective contents are those about which we can faultlessly disagree, and faultless disagreement can exist only within non-objective domains. Were Kölbel to pick a different and more traditional conception of objectivity, his route to faultless disagreement would not be so direct. For example, Rescher has offered a view of objectivity that is characterized by impartiality, freedom from personal biases and predilections, and universality.¹²⁸ There is no direct link between this sort of view of objectivity and the existence of faultless disagreement, but unless Kölbel can show the inferiority of this conception, his own view of objectivity appears objectionably ad hoc. I will not attempt to settle this issue, and I will instead proceed with Kölbel's view.

Kölbel considers the following argument against the existence of faultless disagreement.¹²⁹

Argument against faultless disagreement

- (1) A believes that p .
- (2) B believes that not- p .
- (3) p
- (4) not-T(not- p)
- (5) B has made a mistake.
- (6) Not- p
- (7) Not-T(p)
- (8) A has made a mistake.
- (9) Either A or B has made a mistake.

¹²⁸ See Rescher (1997). In contrast to Rescher's epistemological view of objectivity, in which an agent's epistemic practices are emphasized, Kölbel's view of objectivity is metaphysical in the sense that it is the domain of discourse that matters.

¹²⁹ For discussion of this proof, see Kölbel (2003), Rosenkranz (2008), Iacona (2008), and Wright (2006).

Consider some arbitrary proposition p , which can either be true or false. Suppose that A believes p , and B believes $\text{not-}p$. If p is true, then B has made a mistake. And if $\text{not-}p$ is true, then A has made a mistake. Therefore, either A or B has made a mistake and the disagreement cannot be faultless. Thus, we seem to have shown that for any proposition p , disagreement over p entails that someone has made a mistake. According to Kölbel, this argument relies on the following two commitments, at least one of which must be dropped or suitably revised in order to block this conclusion.

Equivalence schema (ES): it is true that p iff p .

Truth (T): it is a mistake to believe a proposition that is not true.

If we accept both (ES) and (T), then our conclusion that no disagreements are faultless will follow. In this case, Kölbel considers two options of what to say about apparent cases. We can either take the realist route and claim that such purported examples are not faultless.¹³⁰ Or, we can take the contextualist route and claim that such cases do not involve genuine disagreement.¹³¹ On the other hand, if we are determined to challenge the conclusion of the above argument by accepting the existence of faultless disagreement, then we can either restrict (ES) and become expressivists, or relativize (T) and become relativists.¹³² In this chapter, I will focus on contextualism and relativism as possible responses to the matter of faultless disagreement. My reason for limiting my discussion in this way is that an examination of realism and expressivism would carry me too far afield. And further, as I will argue, Kölbel's diagnosis of the problems faced by the contextualist runs parallel to those ultimately faced by the relativist.

¹³⁰ Kölbel is primarily concerned with the version of realism presented by Crispin Wright in his (1992).

¹³¹ Kölbel has alternately referred to the contextualist option as "revisionism," and "indexical relativism" (borrowing from Wright's 2001). For clarity of discussion, I will favor the use of "contextualism" for the sort of view that Kölbel has in mind.

¹³² See Kölbel (2003).

III. Contextualism and the possibility of faultless disagreement

To repeat, Kölbel mentions two options for those who deny the existence of faultless disagreement. They may either deny that apparent cases are faultless, or they may deny that they are really disagreements. The contextualist takes the latter approach by treating the sorts of predicates under consideration along the lines of indexicals. According to standard semantics *a la* Kaplan, the content of a sentence containing an indexical element varies with the context of use. That is, which proposition is expressed by some sentence depends on who utters it, when it is uttered, etc.¹³³ For example, the sentence “I am hungry” expresses a different proposition when Peter utters it than it does when Jane utters it, and as a result one may speak truly while the other speaks falsely even though they have uttered the same sentence. On a contextualist treatment of predicates of personal taste, aesthetics, or morality, such sentences contain subtle indexical references to the speaker or to the speaker’s standards. For example, when Jane asserts that “Apples are delicious” and Peter makes the contradictory assertion that “No, apples are not delicious,” the actual content of their assertions is other than what is revealed by the surface grammar. Rather than their utterances concerning apples, each speaker has really said that they find apples delicious, or that apples are delicious according to their preferences or standards. And likewise for predicates such as “beautiful” and “moral.”

Contextualism displays a kind of relativity in that the content of our sentences about a certain range of topics varies with the context of use. However, once the content has been determined by the context, the proposition expressed has its truth like any other, i.e., non-relatively. The advantage of this approach is that the tricky issue of non-

¹³³ See Kaplan (1989).

objective discourse of interest to relativists such as Kölbel can be given a treatment in line with standard semantics. The contextualist simply applies Kaplan's widely accepted analysis of indexicals to evaluative predicates. However, the worry is whether these sorts of predicates can be plausibly treated in this way. Relativists such as Kölbel and MacFarlane do not think that this can be done.¹³⁴

Their primary reason for rejecting the contextualist account is that it cannot preserve the sense in which we intuitively think that two persons can disagree with one another. As Kölbel points out, the contextualist analysis does not preserve the normative component of moral and taste predicates. To say that some action or flavor is "bad" is not simply to describe that action or flavor, but to evaluate it. However, on the contextualist account, our normative utterances turn out to refer to our own standards rather than to the actions or objects to which we intuitively thought we were referring. So, when a person A asserts the sentence that "Vegemite is tasty," the proposition expressed by this sentence is the same as that expressed by the sentence "According to my standard of taste, vegemite is tasty." Kölbel says that these sentences are "propositionally equivalent," meaning that they express the same proposition in any context.¹³⁵ However, by making our normative utterances equivalent to descriptive statements about our own standards, the contextualist has essentially changed the topic.

Notes Kölbel,

...[on the contextualist account] when I say 'Blair ought to go to war', I assert that my moral code requires Blair to go to war. I am therefore talking *about* my moral code. However, this seems wrong: I talk about Blair and what he ought to do, and *not* about my moral code and what it requires Blair to do.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ See Kölbel (2004) and MacFarlane (2007).

¹³⁵ Kölbel (2004), p. 301.

¹³⁶ Kölbel (2004), p. 303.

But not only does the contextualist lose the normative quality of such utterances, she also faces the resulting problem of accounting for disagreement. By treating the predicate “tasty” like an indexical, it will follow that A’s assertion of “Vegemite is tasty” will fail to contradict B’s assertion of “No, vegemite is not tasty.” The reason is that A has really asserted something like “According to my standard of taste, vegemite is tasty,” while B has asserted something like “According to my different standard of taste, vegemite is not tasty.” But as MacFarlane points out, A and B have no more disagreed with each other than if A had asserted “My name is John” while B asserted “No, my name is not John.”¹³⁷

Although Kölbel nowhere attempts an exhaustive analysis of disagreement, such an analysis does not seem necessary to highlight the difficulties facing the contextualist with regard to certain intuitive conditions for disagreement. We have already seen from the above discussion that one necessary condition of disagreement is that the parties to the dispute must contradict each other, with A believing/judging p while B believes/judges $\text{not-}p$.¹³⁸ In order for contradiction to be possible, it must be the same proposition, p , that forms that substance of the disagreement. The contextualist account entails that each person asserts a different proposition, and as a result, the content of A’s belief is distinct from the content of B’s belief. But in this case, they have failed to disagree with each other.

According to Kölbel, the intuitive sense in which parties to a disagreement contradict each other is that if A and B are disagreeing, then neither can rationally accept

¹³⁷ MacFarlane (2007), p. 18.

¹³⁸ See Kölbel’s condition (a) of faultless disagreement, above.

what the other has asserted without changing his mind.¹³⁹ The nature of disagreement is such that it forces a choice between your and your opponent's belief. However, the contextualist account would allow us to accept the other person's belief while simultaneously maintaining our own belief. Since the contextualist thinks that A and B have asserted different propositions whose truth may be compatible, there is no epistemic pressure to choose between each other's beliefs. A may consistently believe both "According to my standards, cherries are delicious," and "According to your [B's] standards, cherries are not delicious." But in this case, Kölbel is right that they are simply talking past each other rather than having a genuine disagreement.

Independently of the matter of faultless disagreement, I think that disagreements over taste, morality, beauty, etc. are at least possible. If we would like to maintain the intuition that this is the case, then we have reason to be suspicious of a theory that would seem to make such disagreement impossible. Kölbel has voiced certain concerns about the inability of contextualism to account for disagreement, concerns shared by other theorists, e.g., MacFarlane, and that I find reasonable.¹⁴⁰ His next move is to argue that relativism preserves an intuitive sense of disagreement while avoiding the problems of contextualism. After considering Kölbel's relativism, I will ultimately argue that his view fares little better than the contextualist's.

¹³⁹ Kölbel (2004), p. 305. Presumably, the sense in which accepting both my belief and that of my opponent cannot be rational is that to do so would mean accepting contradictory propositions. This issue is complicated due to the fact that it is difficult to tie rationality to logical consistency. It may sometimes be rational to accept a contradiction, e.g., in a case where one did not recognize it as such. Think here of Frege's theory of sets prior to Russell's pointing out the inconsistency resting at its heart. However, such problems are not relevant for our purposes, since Kölbel is concerned with cases in which the existence of the contradiction between A's belief that *p* and B's belief that not-*p* is obvious.

¹⁴⁰ However, see Lopez de Sa (2007), (2008), and Glanzberg (2007) for contextualist responses. Though I do not find the contextualist's approach convincing, I lack the space to consider these views here.

IV. Relativism

Kölbel, like Hales, also relativizes the truth of propositions to parameters or perspectives in addition to possible worlds.¹⁴¹ Just as a proposition's truth may vary from world to world, Kölbel thinks that its truth may also vary from one perspective to another even within the same world. As he says, "Relativism is here understood to be the claim that sentences of some category express propositions the truth of which is relative to a parameter over and above the standard world parameter."¹⁴² However, Kölbel notes that while any two communicators will be located in the same possible world, they may each occupy different perspectives.¹⁴³ Though Kölbel draws an explicit parallel between his relativism and possible world semantics, he does not attempt to press the analogy to the degree that Hales does. This is fortunate, because as we have seen, by pressing this analogy Hales faced the difficulty of reconciling his view of perspectives with possible worlds. Further, Kölbel is more directly concerned with a narrower set of semantic issues, and his relativism is less applicable to the sorts of traditional epistemic and metaphysical issues with which Hales is concerned. As mentioned, Kölbel's aim is to offer a semantic account of truth that is metaphysically neutral. Kölbel's relativism consists of the following three theses:

- (i) It is relative to P whether a thing has feature F.
- (ii) There is at least one x and perspectives p_i, p_j which belong to P, such that x has F in relation to p_i , but not in relation to p_j .
- (iii) There is no uniquely relevant choice of perspective.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ However, as I noted in Chapter 1, their use of "perspectives" diverge. In particular, Kölbel's use of "perspectives" lacks the epistemic component of "ways of knowing."

¹⁴² Kölbel (2009), pp. 375-376.

¹⁴³ Kölbel (2003), p. 72.

¹⁴⁴ Kölbel (2004), pp. 299-300.

The first condition is the most general feature of any view that is relativistic. Kölbel explains that P indicates some range of things (perspectives, methods, frames of reference, standards, parameters, etc.) relative to which something has or lacks some property. For example, tallness is a property that someone has or lacks relative to other individuals his age, gender, nationality, etc. Kölbel adds the second condition to block trivial cases in which (i) holds, but in which either there is only one perspective in the range of P, or else all perspectives in the range of P give the same judgment about whether x has F. In such cases, there would be no possibility of conflicting assessments of propositions between perspectives, and hence no problem of disagreement.

Finally, Kölbel's third condition is necessary because without it, the resulting view would not be relativistic in any philosophically controversial sense. I take it there is nothing particularly objectionable about the claim that whether x has F depends on the perspective used, and that different perspectives may give different answers. As long as there is some principled way to decide to which perspective we should appeal, then the view is less controversial, though also far less philosophically interesting. But as we have seen from the history of this theory, relativists have not simply claimed that whether something is true is relative to various perspectives. They have generally defended the further claim that there is no principled way to decide between or evaluate perspectives themselves. As Kölbel notes, "privileging some perspectives...goes against the basic commitments of the relativist."¹⁴⁵ For Kölbel, relativism is therefore the conjunction of (i)-(iii).

Kölbel's relativism, it will be remembered, is relativism about the truth of propositions. With this in mind, he notes that relativism concerning some domain can be

¹⁴⁵ Kölbel (2011a), p. 23.

equivalently stated as relativism about the truth of propositions in that domain.^{146,147} For example, aesthetic relativism can be viewed as relativism about the truth of propositions concerning aesthetics. For example, the content of the sentence “The *Mona Lisa* is a beautiful piece of art” has a truth-value only relative to some aesthetic perspective. It is true relative to one perspective, and false relative to another, with no privileging of perspectives that would justify a selection of one of them over another.

One virtue that Kölbel claims for his relativism is that it does not follow from his position that error or mistakes are impossible, as may be the case with certain radical varieties of relativism. Nor is it the case that propositions are true or false depending on our whims or opinions, as is the case with Protagoreanism. But unlike the case with objective domains of discourse in which errors and falsehood consist in a mismatch between a proposition and the world, errors in non-objective domains of discourse consist in a mismatch between a proposition and some perspective. Relative to perspectives, there is a fact of the matter whether, say, the *Mona Lisa* is a beautiful work of art, and errors are possible insofar as someone may misinterpret the truth-value ascribed to a proposition by some perspective. So, at least at this level, Kölbel’s view does not open the gates to an ‘anything goes’ sort of relativism.¹⁴⁸

Having given a quick summary of the central features of Kölbel’s relativism, I now want to consider several initial worries. It may be wondered whether his view faces the sort of self-undermining objection encountered by many relativists. Insofar as

¹⁴⁶ Kölbel (2011a), p. 19. In the event that we speak about the truth of sentences, Kölbel notes that sentences have truth-values only in the derivative sense that the propositions expressed by sentences have truth-values.

¹⁴⁷ Wright (2008a) makes this point as well.

¹⁴⁸ We have already seen the way in which Hales’ also tries to relativize the truth of propositions to facts as determined by perspectives.

Kölbel's relativism is not reflexive, this worry (at least in its traditional form, i.e., Plato) does not arise. With regard to the sorts of non-objective domains of discourse that we have been considering, Kölbel nowhere indicates that his relativism falls within its own scope.

However, elsewhere Kölbel has considered more sweeping formulations of global relativism that are self-referential, and as such, he is faced with worries concerning self-undermining.¹⁴⁹ While he may successfully show that some version of global relativism is logically consistent, he admits that such a view may still be self-undermining in the Platonic sense, which he labels “dialectical self-refutation.” According to Kölbel, a position is dialectically self-refuting if “it is impossible for a respondent to defend in debate, given a certain set of rules of engagement.”¹⁵⁰ It is clear that Kölbel's notion of dialectical self-refutation and our self-undermining share the idea that it is the *defense* of relativism that is the problem. As I have noted, the Platonic objection hinges on whether the relativistic thesis being offered is self-referential, and so it is not a foregone conclusion that Kölbel's relativism will be vulnerable to this charge. To the extent that he argues for a version of global relativism, he will be open to this objection. Kölbel notes that in order for global relativism to escape the charge of dialectical self-refutation, the relativist must consider the normative constraints governing our beliefs and assertions more generally. Discussion of these issues must wait until Chapter 6, but for now I will consider several worries concerning the more limited form of relativism we have been discussing thus far.

¹⁴⁹ See Kölbel (2011a).

¹⁵⁰ Kölbel (2011a), p. 14.

There are a set of worries concerning the relationship between our judgments and the perspectives relative to which they supposedly receive their truth-values. Kölbel says that “each thinker possesses one perspective at any one time, and one makes a mistake if one believes a proposition that is not true in one’s own perspective.”¹⁵¹ This statement may be an idealization, or he may intend it to be taken at face value. If this is merely an idealization and Kölbel believes that we sometimes occupy more than one perspective relevant to the matter at hand, then unfortunately his relativism will not help us to decide what we should believe in the sorts of cases facing actual thinkers. Since on his account there can be no privileging of perspectives, we are faced with an arbitrary choice of what to believe whenever our equally valid perspectives yield conflicting judgments.

On the other hand, if he means this statement at face value, then it seems manifestly false. It is hard to see how the claim that we each possess only *one* perspective relevant to the question at hand is plausible. But what does it mean for a thinker to *possess* a perspective in the first place? According to Kölbel, perspective possession is constrained by *a priori* considerations that govern correct or mistaken belief-formation. He notes that

...it may be that generally a belief to the effect that *X* is tasty is mistaken if *X* tends to cause a certain emotional response *D* in the believer. This would constraint the relation of perspective possession: it would rule out, for example, that someone who exhibits response *D* to anchovies possess a perspective which evaluates as correct the proposition that anchovies are tasty.¹⁵²

A thinker who believed that anchovies are tasty all the while experiencing disgust at the thought of eating them would therefore appear to possess a perspective according to which the claim that anchovies are tasty is false. But in this case, the speaker is in

¹⁵¹ Kölbel (2002), p. 100.

¹⁵² Kölbel (2003), p. 71.

error, since he has believed something false. However, while Kölbel takes the above to be the primary constraint on perspective possession, he does not offer any reason to think that we cannot possess more than one perspective at a time. Further, if our emotional responses play a role in determining whether we possess some perspective, then it seems fairly easy to construct cases in which different emotional responses indicate possession of different perspectives.

For example, relative to one set of considerations, I may find corndogs delicious. However, relative to another set of considerations that includes the thought of how I feel an hour after eating them, I may react with disgust to the thought of eating corndogs. Our emotional responses are often ambivalent, a feature that Kölbel overlooks. And where we display inconsistent emotional responses, his account suggests that we possess perspectives that give inconsistent judgments as to the truth of the claim. But then what should we believe in cases where different perspectives give different and incompatible assessments of our claims? Kölbel's counsel to believe what is true will not help us, since incompatible propositions are true relative to different perspectives without any way to justify the choice of one perspective over another. Our beliefs about what is tasty therefore become arbitrary.

I will consider the trouble that these considerations raise for disagreement, but at this stage I simply want to point out the difficulty raised for normative constraints of belief-formation when the truth of what is believed is relative to arbitrarily chosen perspectives. My point here is similar to one common objection to cultural relativism. If the truth of moral claims is relativized to cultures, then as long as we are members of more than one culture, we are left with the pressing pragmatic difficulty of what to do

when our cultures prescribe inconsistent actions. Similarly, if our perspectives prescribe inconsistent beliefs, and there is no way of privileging one perspective over another, then we are left with the difficulty of deciding what we should believe. Tying the notion of perspective possession to something as unstable and ambivalent as our emotional responses cannot ensure that we will possess only one relevant perspective.

Additionally, Kölbel's view of the relationship between our emotions, perspectives, and the truth-value of our claims concerning taste strikes me as very peculiar. Recall that the relationship is supposed to be that particular emotional responses pick out perspectives relative to which the corresponding belief is true or false. But consider someone unsure as to whether her belief that anchovies are tasty is true. It would be a strange approach to this question for her to consult her perspective in order to form the proper belief, and we would justifiably take someone who tried to settle the matter in this way as failing to understand what it means to find something tasty. The more reasonable approach would simply be to taste and see whether anchovies are tasty. The best reason we have for believing that something is tasty is that we enjoy it, and not that it is tasty relative to our perspective(s). If judgments concerning what is tasty require a perspective or standard to decide their truth, then it is not clear what role is still played by experience. In these sorts of ordinary cases, no notion of perspectives or perspective possession seems to play an explanatory role regarding our beliefs about what is tasty. Rather, we seem to move directly from our emotional responses to the corresponding beliefs.

While it is clear that Kölbel does not think that perspectives alone are sufficient for determining the truth of our beliefs, my worry is whether perspectives are even

necessary. If they are not, then Kölbel has offered a needlessly convoluted picture of what it means to find something tasty. So even if we accept the by no means uncontroversial view that claims regarding what is tasty are truth-apt in the first place, it requires additional argument to show that their truth is relative to perspectives or standards of taste.

Kölbel faces the difficult task of balancing our emotional responses with our perspectives. If he places too much weight on perspectives, then the role of our emotions becomes obscure. On the other hand, if he places too much weight on our emotions, then the role of perspectives becomes obscure. What he does not want is for the relationship between these two considerations to leave open the possibility that a person's emotional responses diverge from the perspective-relative truth of her belief. There is admittedly something odd about someone who believes that anchovies are disgusting, but nevertheless enjoys eating them. As we have seen, Kölbel tries to block these sorts of cases by arguing that our emotional responses count as evidence for whether or not we occupy the perspective in question, and in this way he tries to ensure that our responses will line up with our perspectives. But as I have tried to show, this account seems too convoluted, and threatens to misrepresent the way in which our responses relate to our beliefs in matters of taste.

I will now turn to the issue of relativism and faultless disagreement. As already seen, Kölbel convincingly argues that contextualism cannot account for the existence of apparent cases, since it removes the possibility of disagreement. He believes that relativism, which view I have quickly sketched above, offers a more promising

explanation. But as I will try to show, his relativism ultimately faces worries regarding disagreement that are similar to those encountered by contextualism.

V. Some worries concerning (ES) and (T)

Recall that for Kölbel, the argument against the possibility of faultless disagreement relies on a commitment to the following two principles:

Equivalence schema (ES): it is true that p iff p .

Truth (T): it is a mistake to believe a proposition that is not true.

Kölbel sees the trouble as lying with (T), and proposes a revision to make room for faultless disagreement. But before discussing Kölbel's revision, it is worth pointing out what he finds promising with (T). (T), thinks Kölbel, is a fundamental normative principle. Independently of the question of relativism, Kölbel thinks that truth is a normative constraint on belief such that believing something false is to commit a fault or mistake. "By any standards, truth is a norm governing belief (and assertion). To believe (or assert) something not true is to commit a mistake of *some* kind."¹⁵³

However, if the truth of our utterances concerning taste, beauty, etc. is unrelativized, then disagreements will always show that someone is at fault. Kölbel's strategy is to keep the spirit of (T), but adjust it to his relativism.

(TR): it is a mistake to believe a proposition that is not true in one's own perspective.¹⁵⁴

We can now see why Kölbel thinks that relativism leaves room for faultless disagreement. The mere fact that some proposition is true does not mean that it would be correct for us to believe it, where for Kölbel the correctness of a belief is equivalent to

¹⁵³ Kölbel (2002), pp. 27-28.

¹⁵⁴ Kölbel (2003), p. 70.

truth relative to our own perspective.¹⁵⁵ According to (TR), we should aim not simply for truth, but for truth relative to our own perspective. In the case of non-objective domains where truth is relative, one person may correctly believe that p while someone else correctly believes that $\text{not-}p$. Since neither person has made the mistake of believing something false relative to his perspective, both are faultless.

But are they disagreeing? I will examine this matter more fully in what follows, but here I will explain the way in which Kölbel thinks that his relativism preserves a sense of genuine disagreement. Remember that on the contextualist account, the persons involved turned out not to be disagreeing, since the proposition expressed by one did not contradict the proposition expressed by the other. Unlike contextualism, Kölbel's relativism preserves the content from one speaker to another, thereby making it possible for them to contradict each other. Since person A affirms the same proposition that person B denies, Kölbel's condition (a) for faultless disagreement—A believes (judges) that p and B believes (judges) that $\text{not-}p$ —is met. The second problem Kölbel raised for a contextualist account of disagreement was that it made it possible for the persons involved to accept each other's assertions without needing to change their minds. Since their beliefs did not contradict each other, both can be held simultaneously contrary to our intuitions about disagreement. However, by keeping the content fixed, Kölbel's relativism blocks this possibility. The parties to the disagreement can no longer accept their opponent's belief while maintaining their own, since owing to the fact that their beliefs are inconsistent, it is not the case that both beliefs can be true relative to any

¹⁵⁵ Kölbel (2009), p. 387.

perspective.¹⁵⁶ Our intuition that a disagreement requires a choice between p and not- p has been preserved.

There are two points worth mentioning. The first is that, as already seen, Kölbel argues that faultless disagreement is possible only in non-objective domains where disagreement does not entail that anyone holds a false belief. But additionally, faultless disagreement is possible only when the parties to the dispute occupy different perspectives. Since perspectives cannot yield contradictory judgments regarding the truth of propositions, A's belief that p and B's belief that not- p cannot both be correct within the same perspective. The presence of intraperspectival disagreement therefore indicates that someone is at fault. But as will be seen shortly, this poses a problem for Kölbel's project. I now want to examine two potential worries. The first concerns the relationship between Kölbel's semantics and his acceptance of (ES), and the second concerns the normative component of (TR).

Though Kölbel thinks that his relativism improves on the contextualist's semantics, there are some worries. Unlike the contextualist's account, which posits a kind of hidden indexicality, Kölbel's treatment of sentences employing taste and moral predicates is more direct. An assertion that "Vegemite is tasty" has precisely the content that it seems to have, i.e., that *Vegemite is tasty*. The constancy of content, as we have seen, is what is supposed to make disagreement possible. But the picture may not be so neat.

¹⁵⁶ With regard to relativism about taste predicates, Kölbel appears to favor the idea that perspectives are consistent. This explains his comment that "it is clear why I can't come to believe what you said without needing to change my mind: what you have said and what I have said cannot both be true in relation to the same perspective." See Kölbel (2004), p. 307. However, elsewhere in considering various formulations of global relativism, he is less committal regarding the logical consistency of perspectives. With regard to global relativism, it is not clear whether his claim that there is no privileging of perspectives allows the possibility of true contradictions. See his (2011a). This is a puzzling matter, and I will shelve it for the present since I am concerned with his limited version of relativism about non-objective domains.

The deflationist sense of truth that Kölbel favors for non-objective discourse offers a metaphysically neutral analysis of the truth predicate. This is sometimes expressed with the equivalence schema—the proposition p is true if and only if p .

Kölbel notes that

The truth predicate generates a sentence that expresses, by virtue of its meaning, a proposition equivalent to the one expressed by the original sentence. The truth predicate is a “de-nominalizer”—it turns a noun referring to a proposition into a sentential phrase expressing an equivalent proposition...Some deflationists express this view of the meaning of “true” by stating that we accept (or have at least an inclination to accept) each instance of the equivalence schema.¹⁵⁷

Given his acceptance of the equivalence schema, the sentence “Vegemite is tasty” is equivalent to “It is true that vegemite is tasty.” But in adapting the equivalence schema to his relativism, what does “true” mean in this latter sentence? It cannot be truth *simpliciter*, since the content of these sorts of sentences is supposed to be relative. On the other hand, if by “true” Kölbel means “true relative to my perspective,” then we are faced with the sorts of worries regarding disagreement that arose for the contextualist’s semantics.¹⁵⁸

Further, until Kölbel clarifies his use of the truth predicate, the content of our beliefs and assertions regarding non-objective matters will be unclear. It seems a natural step to think that once we believe that “Vegemite is tasty” and recognize that this entails that “It is true that vegemite is tasty,” we will also believe the latter.¹⁵⁹ But as long as the use of “true” remains unclear, what do we take to be the content of our belief and assertion that “It is true that vegemite is tasty”? Again, we cannot mean that “It is true *simpliciter* that vegemite is tasty,” since we recognize that the truth of this proposition is

¹⁵⁷ Kölbel (2008b), p. 362.

¹⁵⁸ I discussed a similar problem in Hales’ use of the truth predicate in Chapter 2.

¹⁵⁹ I say only that this move seems like a “natural step,” and not that it is a matter of entailment.

relative to perspectives. But nor can we take ourselves to mean that “It is true relative to my perspective that vegemite is tasty,” since this reading collapses back into contextualism. A’s assertion that “It is true relative to my perspective that vegemite is tasty” will not contradict B’s assertion that “It is false relative to my [different] perspective that vegemite is tasty.” But without the persons involved at least contradicting each other, disagreement is impossible, as Kölbel himself argues in the case of contextualism.

I turn now to some worries regarding Kölbel’s acceptance of (T), i.e., that it is a mistake to believe a proposition that is not true. As we have seen, Kölbel takes committing the mistake of believing something false and being at fault to be synonymous. However, here I think that Kölbel is guilty of a serious confusion. In what follows, I will argue that these notions must be kept distinct from each other, since one can believe something false without being at fault, and one can be at fault without believing something false. The first point can be made by considering a famous example from the history of science.

When Galileo invented the telescope, many of his most brilliant scientific contemporaries were unconvinced that the device produced trustworthy observations of celestial objects. Much has been made about the supposed narrow-mindedness of Galileo’s religious contemporaries, but what is not often enough recognized is that many of the objections to Galileo’s findings were made on the basis of sound scientific, and not religious reasons. Galileo had no working theory of optics that could explain how his lenses accurately revealed the features of objects. Further, his findings were at odds with well-supported Ptolemaic astronomy. Though the telescope performed admirably when

used to observe terrestrial objects (which allowed the possibility of calibrating the instrument), this offered no guarantee that it was equally reliable when observing celestial objects. For these and other reasons, Galileo's opponents held a much stronger position than is often appreciated.¹⁶⁰

As we now know, Galileo's opponents were wrong. But in what sense were they at fault? In so far as they examined the evidence carefully and formed their beliefs on the basis of the best reasons available, there was nothing they could reasonably have done to avoid error. If they can be said to have committed the mistake of believing something false, then it was surely a faultless mistake. Unfortunately, Kölbel treats the absence of false belief and faultlessness as synonymous, and they are not. Faultlessness implies that a person has not violated any epistemic norms in arriving at the belief in question, and this may be the case whether or not the belief is true. Kölbel himself makes this point in noting that two subjects are faultless when "none of them is violating a norm for evaluating their claims *to which they are subject* [Kölbel's italics].¹⁶¹ If faultlessness depends on whether the person has obeyed the relevant epistemic norm rather than on whether his belief is true, then (T), and as a result, (TR) are misguided. The emphasis should not be on whether the belief is true, but rather on whether the belief was supported by good reasons. Someone who believes something false, but on the basis of impeccable reasons, should still be considered faultless.

On the other hand, one may be at fault without believing something false. For example, if I base my belief that it will rain tomorrow on the reading of a Magic-8 ball, I will presumably be at fault even if my belief turns out to be true. The reason is that

¹⁶⁰ See Feyerabend's (1993) for discussion.

¹⁶¹ Kölbel (2009), p. 391.

consulting a Magic-8 ball rather than some more reputable source for forecasting the weather places me in violation of some relevant epistemic norms. But since faultlessness concerns the question of whether or not I have violated epistemic norms to which I am subject, I will count as being at fault even though my belief turns out to be true. Examples can be multiplied, but I think the point is clear. Having a false belief and being at fault are two distinct considerations, and Kölbel's view of faultless disagreement suffers as a result of his conflation of these separate notions.

Now that I have raised some initial worries to Kölbel's position, I will examine in more detail the challenges that arise for the possibility of faultless disagreement. As I will argue, his relativism undermines the sense of disagreement, and as a result, the notion of faultless disagreement is compromised.

VI. Relativism and the possibility of faultless disagreement

We are now ready to see why Kölbel's relativism cannot account for the existence of faultless disagreement. Taking seriously the idea of perspectives, we see that faultless disagreement may arise either within or between perspectives. As already mentioned, assuming that perspectives do not contain contradictions, faultless disagreement is not possible within them. So, if such disagreement is to be possible, then it can only arise between perspectives. But consider the following argument, in which a person is faultless just in case his belief is correct (true) relative to his perspective.

- (1) If A and B are having a disagreement regarding p , then A and B are contradicting each other—A believes/judges p while B believes/judges not- p (Assumption).
- (2) If A and B are contradicting each other, then it cannot be the case that both of their beliefs are correct (Assumption).
- (3) If A and B are having a disagreement regarding p , then it cannot be the case that both of their beliefs are correct (by 1 and 2).
- (4) Suppose that correctness is relativized to perspectives (Assumption).

- (5) If correctness is relativized to perspectives, then it can be the case that both of their beliefs are correct.
- (6) It can be the case that both of their beliefs are correct (by 4 and 5).
- (7) Therefore, A and B are not contradicting each other (by 2 and 6).
- (8) Therefore, A and B are not having a disagreement regarding p (by 1 and 7).
- (9) Therefore, A and B are not having a faultless disagreement regarding p .

Unlike the original argument against faultless disagreement that made no reference to relativism, this argument takes seriously Kölbel's idea of perspectival correctness. Further, while the original argument aimed to show that whether p or not- p was true, someone was at fault, the above argument instead shows that on the assumption that both parties are faultless it follows that they are not engaged in a genuine disagreement. It should also be noted that this argument, like the original, makes no distinction between objective and non-objectives domains of discourse. If it is successful, then restricting our discussion to non-objective matters as Kölbel has done will make no difference regarding the possibility of faultless disagreement. But in order to see whether this argument is successful, I will discuss the premises in light of Kölbel's commitments.

The pivotal premises are (1), (2), (4), and (5). According to (1), contradiction is a necessary condition of disagreement, as Kölbel himself accepts—see (a) of his definition of faultless disagreement. We therefore have little reason to think that Kölbel would reject my first premise. Kölbel has explicitly defended (4) and (5). However, the pivotal premise, and the one Kölbel must reject if he is to block my conclusion, is (2). Kölbel's notion of faultlessness relative to perspectives explicitly denies this premise, since correctness relative to different perspectives is what is supposed to make it possible for both A's belief that p and B's contradictory belief that not- p both to be correct. But the possibility of mutual correctness required for faultless disagreement is in tension with the

claim that p and not- p stand in contradiction to each other. It is definitional that if two propositions are contradictory, then they cannot both be true. Equivalently, if they can both be true (say, relative to different perspectives), then they are not contradictory. Kölbel's intention to reconcile perspectival faultlessness with the claim that the parties involved are contradicting each other requires a non-standard account of contradiction whereby p and not- p may both be true, and so far he has not attempted to provide one.

Peter Lasersohn, himself a relativist, also notes this difficulty:

The challenge for semantic theory is in accounting for this intuition of direct contradiction and simultaneously for the intuition of faultlessness which such examples produce.¹⁶²

Returning to contextualism, the fundamental problem regarding disagreement was not simply that p 's content shifted from A to B. It was rather that the fact that the shifted content meant that A and B were no longer contradicting each other, as evidenced by the fact that it was possible for both of them to hold a true belief. If this is the correct diagnosis of contextualism's problem with disagreement, then it should be recognized that Kölbel's relativism has the same problem.¹⁶³ Since both A and B's beliefs can be correct relative to their different perspectives, they are not contradicting each other. As Stojanovic notes, "Disagreement is genuine only when the one party's being right entails that the other party is wrong."¹⁶⁴ But without contradicting each other, they are not disagreeing, as Kölbel himself recognizes in the case of contextualism. The upshot of this argument is that if A and B are both faultless in their respective beliefs relative to

¹⁶² See Lasersohn (2011), p. 436.

¹⁶³ See Stojanovic (2007), Francen (2010), Richard (2004), Montminy (2009) for additional discussion of the similarities between relativism and contextualism regarding disagreement.

¹⁶⁴ Stojanovic (2007), p. 692.

their different perspectives, then they are not contradicting each other, and hence are not engaged in a genuine disagreement.

Additionally, there is the matter of whether the parties to the dispute can continue to see themselves as engaged in a disagreement after they have recognized their mutual faultlessness, what Wright has referred to as the “sustainability” of the disagreement:

What is the relevant notion of propositional identity, and how is it possible rationally to affirm the truth of such a proposition consistently with allowing that someone else’s denial of it is also true?¹⁶⁵

If we grant Kölbel that A and B are both faultless and that they are contradicting each other in the most straightforward sense, then how can they sustain their disagreement after recognizing these facts? If we are to maintain that A and B, occupying their different perspectives, are nevertheless engaged in a disagreement, then we must be explicit about what exactly is the substance of the disagreement.

For the sake of argument, let’s suppose that A accepts while B denies p , and that in accordance with (TR), both believe what is true relative to their own perspectives. Now, consider all of the beliefs surrounding p that A and B can hold. They can both recognize that p is true for A and false for B, and they can both recognize that neither of them is at fault. Further, since what each ought to believe varies relative to their different perspectives, there is no reason why the truth of p in A’s perspective should exert any rational pressure on B to change his mind. Kölbel’s relativism has one important feature that does not seem to be relativistic at all, and this is the idea that regardless of which perspective you occupy, you ought to believe what is true in that perspective. According to Kölbel, and relativists more generally, *our* perspective is the one relevant for forming

¹⁶⁵ See Wright (2006), p. 54.

beliefs, and what is true in someone else's perspective is irrelevant.¹⁶⁶ To borrow a nice phrase from Rovane, the inhabitants of different perspectives are in a state of "normative insularity."¹⁶⁷

If A and B still take themselves to be having a disagreement after making explicit all of these shared beliefs, the next step would be to argue against each other's perspectives. If neither can find fault with the other's assignment of truth-value to p , then the perspectives themselves must be challenged. But given Kölbel's third condition that there is no uniquely relevant choice of perspective, it is unclear how this can be done. In light of (iii), each can recognize that the perspective relative to which his own belief is true is in no way privileged to the perspective relative to which his opponent's contradictory belief is true. As Kölbel himself recognizes, regardless of what the relativist claims, an opponent can always point to some other perspective that gives a contradictory assessment and is in no way inferior (or superior) to the relativist's own perspective.¹⁶⁸ Since A and B can accept each other's beliefs about all of these things without changing their minds, whatever disagreement they are having cannot be about these issues. But if neither can find fault either with the other's choice of perspective or with the assessment of p relative to his perspective, then in what sense can they still take themselves to be having a disagreement?

Kölbel may remind us that unlike the case of contextualism, the disagreement is about precisely what the surface grammar of p would lead us to expect, e.g., whether vegemite is tasty. But once A and B have recognized each other's faultlessness, what remains to serve as the substance of the disagreement? Assuming that we understand

¹⁶⁶ See Kölbel (2009), p. 387.

¹⁶⁷ Rovane (2011).

¹⁶⁸ Kölbel (2011a).

what it means to contradict each other, having a disagreement means that we cannot take both our belief and our opponent's contradictory belief as true. But Kölbel's relativism requires precisely this.

Duncan Pritchard also raises this problem with positing truth relativism to accommodate faultless disagreement. He notes that

...if we opt for truth relativism, then rather than getting an explanation of why [there] is a genuine disagreement between two parties who are, nevertheless, both right, we instead get the result that the disagreement in question wasn't genuine after all.¹⁶⁹

According to Pritchard, this is because each person takes himself to be speaking the truth *simpliciter*, and not the truth relative to his own framework. As a result, each speaker must take anyone who contradicts him to be speaking a falsehood, and not the truth relative to *their* framework.

Once each has recognized the other's faultlessness relative to his different perspective and the fact that neither of their perspectives can be privileged, it is unclear how they can continue to take themselves to be disagreeing. This objection requires connecting the notion of a disagreement to our thoughts on the matter, but this seems to me a desirable connection to make. Though we may often mistakenly think that we are having a disagreement when we are not, having a disagreement requires that upon reflection we take (would take) ourselves to be having a disagreement. I would argue that if we are having a disagreement, it must be possible for us to claim that we are. But if we do not take the other to hold some false belief, then we cannot take their belief to stand in contradiction to our own. And without thinking that they are contradicting us, we cannot take them to be disagreeing with us.

¹⁶⁹ Pritchard (2009), pp. 397-398.

Kölbel wants to have his cake and eat it. On the one hand, he wants perspectival normativity to prevent what is true in one perspective from having implications for what someone in a different perspective ought to believe; and on the other, he wants a dispute between those occupying different perspectives to count as a disagreement. But as I have argued, this cannot be done. The recognition of the former makes the latter impossible. In a way similar to the problem with contextualism, such disputants would simply be talking past each other.

VII. Other approaches to faultless disagreement

I have offered independent reasons for thinking that faultlessness must be distinguished from having a false belief. Rather than taking faultlessness to mean the absence of holding a false belief, we should understand it to mean that the person did not violate any epistemic norms to which he was subject in forming his belief. Understanding faultlessness in this epistemic sense opens up new ways to approach the possibility of faultless disagreement.

Pritchard has offered one such account that takes faultlessness in an epistemic sense. As noted, Pritchard does not think that we can accommodate the notion of faultless disagreement by positing truth relativism. However, he argues that a version of epistemic relativism, which he labels *dialectical epistemic relativism*, provides a way. Although he is primarily interested in conflicts that arise between religious and secular frameworks, the variety of relativism to which he responds can perhaps be extended to other domains such as those of interest to Kölbel. For reasons of space, I will not consider Pritchard's variety of epistemic relativism.¹⁷⁰ I will instead limit my discussion

¹⁷⁰ But see his (2009).

to the view he ultimately rejects, and consider to what extent such a view may be available to Kölbel.

According to Pritchard, one way to explain the existence of faultless disagreement is to relativize justification rather than truth to epistemic frameworks. Frameworks are composed of clusters of principles that determine the epistemic status of our beliefs. Since frameworks are individuated by their epistemic principles, different frameworks will be composed of different principles. A proponent for this variety of epistemic relativism may argue that faultless disagreement is possible due to the fact that both parties to the dispute may be justified relative to their different frameworks in holding contradictory beliefs. As seen, Pritchard notes the problem faced by the truth relativist in accounting for genuine disagreement. The epistemic relativist may try to remedy this situation by claiming that both parties may be justified, although it is not possible for both to be right. Pritchard takes the epistemic relativist's view to be the following:

Continuing the idea of framework-relative truth, the thought would be that relative to one epistemic framework—such as your religious framework—your claim has a certain epistemic standing, while relative to another epistemic framework—such as my secular framework—my counterclaim would have an epistemic standing of identical strength. While only one of us is in fact right, the point remains that any epistemic criticism I make of your claim will only have force relative to my framework and not relative to yours.¹⁷¹

So, on this epistemic reading of faultlessness, both parties to the dispute may be faultless—since both of their beliefs are justified relative to their own epistemic frameworks—without this entailing that both of their contradictory beliefs are true.

As I will now argue, this account of faultless disagreement faces very similar problems to those already discussed for truth relativism. As a result, Kölbel has reason to avoid

¹⁷¹ Pritchard (2009), p. 398.

moving from truth relativism to epistemic relativism as a solution to the matter of faultless disagreement.

This account does not really escape the problems with truth relativism, since epistemic relativism can be formulated as relativism about the truth of epistemic claims.¹⁷² To use Pritchard's example, relative to one framework the claim that "There is good reason to believe that Moses parted the Red Sea" is true, while this same claim may be false when spoken by someone else in a different framework. But if these contradictory epistemic claims may nevertheless both be true, then the epistemic relativist's view fares no better than truth relativism even though at most one of the parties can be right (i.e., either Moses did or did not part the Red Sea).

Regarding matters of taste, the idea would be that although it is either true or false independently of frameworks that, e.g., apples are delicious, two parties may faultlessly disagree as long as both of their contradictory beliefs are justified relative to their own frameworks or perspectives.¹⁷³ But the relativist who takes this route faces the identical problem that both claims can be formulated as claims about the *truth* of contradictory epistemic claims. As was the case with Kölbel's truth relativism, the mutual correctness of contradictory claims—A's claim that "There is good reason to believe that apples are delicious" and B's claim that "There is not good reason to think that apples are delicious"—precludes the possibility of genuine disagreement.

¹⁷² In the above passage, Pritchard seems to suggest this as well, although he does not press my objection. See his comment that begins, "Continuing the idea of framework-relative truth..."

¹⁷³ An initial worry with this sort of view concerns the idea that a property such as deliciousness is somehow an objective feature of apples. Many will find this claim highly suspect, though I will not comment further on this issue.

But there are additional problems. The epistemic relativist thinks that more than simply positing different epistemic frameworks is necessary to secure faultless disagreement. As Pritchard notes, what is additionally required is the

...further thesis to the effect that no epistemic framework is superior to any other epistemic framework. Only once this claim is in play do we get the conception of faultless disagreement that is required, for it now follows that whatever epistemic censure one applies to the other party can be legitimately ignored by that other party....¹⁷⁴

Pritchard is quite right to point out this additional claim on the part of the relativist. We have seen from both Hales and Kölbel how the relativist denies any neutral standards that would allow us to compare our frameworks and privilege some over others. As Kölbel says regarding matters of taste, “It seems to be a distinctive feature of this area of discourse that none of the standards is privileged.”¹⁷⁵ The conclusion Pritchard draws is that since “...all epistemic frameworks are on an epistemic par...all epistemic frameworks are as good (or, if you prefer, as bad) as each other.”¹⁷⁶

However, once the epistemic relativist denies that standards of taste can themselves be evaluated, the problems raised at length in the last section arise here as well. The problems with disagreement stem not only from the fact that the correctness of contradictory claims undermines the sense of genuine disagreement, but also from the fact that it is not possible to have a disagreement while recognizing mutual faultlessness. So, shifting from truth relativism to relativism about the justification of claims involving matters of taste does not look like a promising route for Kölbel to take.

I will conclude this section by offering some tentative thoughts on a more plausible account of faultless disagreement that does not require any controversial sort of

¹⁷⁴ Pritchard (2009), p. 399.

¹⁷⁵ Kölbel (2009), p. 387.

¹⁷⁶ Pritchard (2009), p. 399.

relativism. There is a straightforward sense in which our justification for believing something is relative to our body of evidence or informational state.¹⁷⁷ Since two people may operate with different bodies of evidence, it will often happen that they are justified in believing different, and sometimes contradictory things. In light of our characterization of faultlessness as belief in accordance with the relevant norm, both parties may be faultless so long as they have both obeyed this norm, e.g., to form one's beliefs in conformity with the best evidence. However, although this relativistic view allows both parties to be faultless, it will not allow them both to have true beliefs. Further, as long as we maintain the view that the parties to the dispute can fairly and neutrally compare and evaluate each other's bodies of evidence, there is no reason to fear that this sort of view will undermine genuine disagreement.

This strikes me as a plausible account of faultless disagreement, though I am not sure whether it would offer Kölbel much support. For one thing, it would require him to abandon his claim that standards cannot be fairly assessed. And further, such a view would not permit both parties to the disagreement to be correct about matters of taste. But as we have seen, mutual correctness concerning non-objective domains such as taste is precisely what Kölbel is interested in securing. To abandon these two claims would deprive Kölbel of the very core of his relativism.

VIII. Conclusion

I have tried to show that Kölbel's relativism cannot account for certain fundamental intuitions about disagreement. If this is right, then the conclusion is that there is no such thing as faultless disagreement. Or at least, there is no such thing as faultless disagreement in Kölbel's sense. I have considered a version of faultless

¹⁷⁷ For example, see Feldman's (1994). See also the view sketched by Hou and Wang in their (2013).

disagreement that relies on epistemic relativism, rather than relativism about truth. However, it appears that Kölbel would face many of the same worries should he take this route. Finally, I have offered a tentative sketch of a version of faultless disagreement that arises from differing bodies of evidence, although, for reasons mentioned, it is doubtful that this view would offer Kölbel much in the way of support.

Chapter 4 - MacFarlane's Relativism and the Possibility of Disagreement

I. Background

Like Kölbel, John MacFarlane has also defended a specifically semantic view of relativism. His central claim is that the truth of propositions in a variety of different domains must be understood as relative to contexts of assessment. MacFarlane has used contexts of assessment on a wide range of philosophical issues, including epistemic modals, future contingents, knowledge attributions, and aesthetic and taste predicates.¹⁷⁸ In this chapter, I will focus on taste predicates both to limit what would otherwise be an excessively long discussion of disparate issues, and to more effectively compare and contrast MacFarlane's treatment of these predicates with Kölbel's, familiar from last chapter.

We will discuss the specific nature and function of contexts of assessment, but first it is necessary to motivate MacFarlane's introduction and use of them. As we will see, MacFarlane's own justification for the introduction of contexts of assessment relies on showing that they are necessary to explain certain features of our use of predicates such as "tasty" and "beautiful." In order to understand his reasons for thinking this, we first need to consider the shortcomings of a few other popular theories. Central to MacFarlane's defense of contexts of assessment is his claim that they allow us to make sense of the phenomenon of disagreement in a way that rival theories do not. In what follows, I will be particularly interested in the extent to which MacFarlane can substantiate this claim. As I will argue, it is far from clear that his treatment of assessment sensitivity avoids the problems facing the relativist in accounting for

¹⁷⁸ See his (2003), (2005a), (2005b), (2007), (2008), and (2014).

disagreement. While MacFarlane's relativism introduces finer distinctions than those present in Kölbel's work, the underlying problems with each look very similar.

II. The problem of taste

As you pop a piece of black licorice in your mouth, you assert, "Licorice is tasty." Although we commonly make such assertions, we also recognize upon reflection that claims involving predicates such as "tasty" seem to differ in important ways from claims involving predicates such as "round" or "red." Someone's claim that "Honey is delicious" does not seem to depend on the nature of the world in quite the same way as does the claim that "Cardinals are red birds." The property of redness may seem to depend on certain objective features of the world in a way that taste does not. Taste, unlike redness, seems to be intimately connected to the responses of an agent.

However, we commonly assert that this or that is tasty even while we are aware of the above considerations. Further, we stand by our assertions even though we recognize that others as well placed and competent as ourselves hold contradictory opinions. This is not the behavior we tend to display in the face of disputes concerning what we might characterize as more objective domains of discourse. The difficulty concerns how we should balance the perceived subjectivity of such judgments with the intuition that we can disagree about what is tasty. So, what should we think of such predicates? MacFarlane considers three explanatory theories, i.e., objectivism, contextualism, and expressivism. I will discuss each in turn.

On the objectivist's treatment of such predicates, which things are tasty is just as much a feature of the world as which things are red or round. As MacFarlane says, "If

you like, think of objectivism as the view that ‘tasty’ is no less objective than ‘red.’”¹⁷⁹ However, competent language users note the dissimilarities between these predicates. The trouble for objectivism is that most of us seem to reject the notion that there is some objective fact of the matter about what is tasty just as there is some objective fact of the matter about whether something is red. According to MacFarlane, the reason we tend to think there is a dissimilarity is that if “tasty,” like “red,” expresses some objective property, then we can only conclude from the existence of widespread disagreement that most of us must be highly defective in our evaluation of various things as tasty. Additionally, MacFarlane notes that if “tasty” expresses an objective property of things, then it is hard to see why consideration of widespread disagreement does not tend to make us more humble in our judgments of what is tasty. On the contrary, we tend to stand by our ascriptions of tastiness even though we recognize that other competent language users disagree.¹⁸⁰ For these and similar reasons, MacFarlane finds objectivism to be an unconvincing theory.

Next, he considers contextualism. According to the contextualist, claims concerning what is tasty are elliptical for claims of what the speaker finds tasty. As we have already seen, this version of contextualism treats such predicates as indexicals.¹⁸¹ On this view, which proposition is expressed by an utterance of “Licorice is tasty” depends on features of the context of use. For reasons that will become apparent shortly, we can label this variety of contextualism ‘indexical contextualism.’

¹⁷⁹ MacFarlane (2014), p. 2. Although MacFarlane offers a more fleshed-out view, I take the above gloss to be sufficient for my purposes here.

¹⁸⁰ See MacFarlane (2014), p. 6 for discussion.

¹⁸¹ Chapter 3, Section III.

MacFarlane points out that the indexical contextualist has a nice answer for the perceived subjectivity of judgments of taste, since the truth of such claims depends in a crucial way on the speaker. Additionally, the perceived subjectivity of such judgments is explained by invoking familiar treatments of indexicals and context sensitivity.¹⁸² However, MacFarlane rejects indexical contextualism for the familiar reason that such a view is unable to account for genuine disagreement. Since both the claim that “Licorice is tasty” and the contradictory claim that “No, licorice is not tasty” may be compatible, two such speakers would not be in disagreement with each other. However, MacFarlane argues that there are two reasons to think that such speakers really are disagreeing. First, the explicit use of expressions such as “No,” “That’s false,” or “You’re mistaken” in our responses to each other are naturally read as an indication of disagreement. Their use would be inappropriate if each speaker is merely asserting what is tasty *to him*. Second, MacFarlane points out that we *argue* about what is tasty. But this practice makes little sense if we are taken to be arguing about what we each find tasty, or what is tasty *to us*.

Further, MacFarlane argues that the indexical contextualist cannot explain why it does not seem odd that speakers are willing to retract earlier assertion after their view of the matter has changed.¹⁸³ For example, when I was a child, I thought that black licorice was delicious, and enjoyed eating it. I now think otherwise, and would be willing to retract any previous assertion to this effect. If someone were to point out that I had previously said that black licorice is tasty, it would be perfectly reasonable for me to respond by saying “I used to think that black licorice was tasty, but I was wrong about that. Black licorice is not tasty.” I would *not* respond by saying “When I said that black

¹⁸² See MacFarlane (2007), p. 18.

¹⁸³ MacFarlane (2014), p. 13.

licorice was tasty, I meant it was tasty to me *then*,” since that is certainly not what my childhood self meant to assert.

According to MacFarlane, what such examples show is that my willingness to retract previous assertions cannot be explained given an indexical treatment of these predicates. After all, if we take “tasty” to be an indexical, then my previous assertion is compatible with my later assertion that “Licorice is not tasty.” But if these claims are compatible, then there is no reason for me to retract my previous claim. In an uncontroversial case of indexical usage, there is no pressure to retract one’s previous assertion. Suppose I assert on Monday “I am hungry” and on Tuesday “I am not hungry.” If someone were to challenge me by pointing out that my later assertion contradicts my previous assertion, it would be perfectly reasonable for me to respond that each assertion referred (perhaps tacitly) to the time in which it was uttered, and so there is no inconsistency between my two claims. If taste predicates behaved like indexicals, then it should strike us as odd to retract previous assertions of what is tasty. But as MacFarlane argues, the fact that we do not think such retractions odd counts against the indexical contextualist’s view.

Finally, MacFarlane considers the expressivist’s treatment of taste predicates.

According to Ayer’s classic defense of the view in reference to moral predicates,

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, “You acted wrongly in stealing that money,” I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, “You stole that money.” In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it...The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Ayer (1954), p. 107.

If we apply this theory to an evaluative predicate like “tasty,” the idea would be that in saying that something is tasty, we do not assert anything capable of having a truth value. Rather, we simply register or express our liking for something. As Macfarlane says, “For the expressivist, saying ‘That’s tasty’ is just a verbal way of smacking one’s lips, just as ‘Drat!’ is a verbal way of expressing disappointment.”¹⁸⁵

However, as MacFarlane points out, the expressivist faces the same problems as those facing the indexical contextualist. First, there is the trouble of accounting for genuine disagreement. Since the expressivist about taste denies that sentences employing taste predicates express truth-evaluable propositions, it will not be possible for one speaker to contradict another.¹⁸⁶ After all, if one person expresses their liking of licorice with the vocalization “Mmmmmmm,” they have not contradicted someone else’s expression of disgust for licorice with the vocalization “Yuck!” At least, no contradiction or disagreement in the ordinary sense will be possible. According to Ayer, the only sense in which two speakers can contradict each other is in having different feelings or taking different attitudes about the matter in question. That is, the remaining sense of disagreement can only concern our sentiments, and not the truth of such claims.

But MacFarlane does not think that mere disagreement in attitude is sufficient to account for disagreements in matters of taste.¹⁸⁷ As we saw in the objection to indexical contextualism, it seems appropriate to express disagreement about taste with the explicit use of “No,” or “You’re mistaken.” Further, MacFarlane notes that disagreement in attitude is not sufficient to explain why we retract prior assertions. To use his example,

¹⁸⁵ MacFarlane (2014), pp. 15-16.

¹⁸⁶ Ayer himself recognized this point. See his (1954), p. 107.

¹⁸⁷ MacFarlane (2014), pp. 16-17.

consider someone who initially dislikes peaty whiskeys, but later comes to find them tasty.¹⁸⁸ Such a person may say

(Whiskey) Last year I said that they weren't very tasty, but I take that back. I was wrong.

While this retraction seems perfectly intelligible, it is hard to make sense out of it along expressivist lines. After all, asks MacFarlane, what can it mean to retract a previous attitude, or to take back one's prior response to peaty whiskeys?

In what follows, I will take for granted that MacFarlane's critiques of objectivism, contextualism, and expressivism are more or less convincing, since my primary concern is to show how their removal clears the ground for MacFarlane to build his own theory. As we have seen, the central problems for the above views concern disagreement, retraction of assertions, and argumentation. Macfarlane ultimately aims to show that his truth relativism fares better with regard to these issues. In this chapter, I will focus on the issues of disagreement and argumentation, and in Chapter 6, Section 4, I will explore MacFarlane's treatment of assertion. We will examine his treatment of taste and predicates shortly, but first we must consider the question of how we should characterize truth relativism. This is a more difficult issue than it may initially appear to be, and requires us to first take a slight detour into some issues in the philosophy of language.

III. Contexts of use versus contexts of assessment

In order to count as a relativist in any radical sense, one must commit to more than the view that the truth of sentences varies with parameters. After all, we are already familiar from standard semantics with uncontroversial ways in which the truth of

¹⁸⁸ MacFarlane (2014), p. 17.

sentences can be relativized.¹⁸⁹ For example, the sentence “I am now in Vancouver” has a truth-value only after the context of use has picked out the relevant world, speaker, and time. As Lewis says,

If a grammar is to do its jobs as part of a systematic restatement of our common knowledge about our practices of linguistic communication, it must assign semantic values that determine which sentences are true in which contexts...A *context* is a location [both spatio-temporal and logical]—time, place, and possible world—where a sentence is said. It has countless features, determined by the character of the location.¹⁹⁰

However, relativizing the truth of sentences to contexts of use has not raised the eyebrows of philosophers suspicious of relativism. Clearly, not all relativizations of truth count as relativism in the stronger, more controversial sense with which we are here concerned. So, at what point do we cross the line from mundane relativizations of truth to relativism proper? Some have argued that this line is crossed as soon as we countenance truth relative to anything other than possible worlds. According to Zimmerman,

A truth-relativism that would deserve its name would have to claim that a proposition can be both true relative to parameter e (at a possible world w) and false relative to parameter e^* (at the same w). My aim in what follows is to argue against relativism so conceived...If you want, I claim that the truth of a proposition is always relative to a possible world, but that it is relative to nothing else.¹⁹¹

However, this way of drawing a demarcation cannot be right, since as we have just seen, sentences containing indexical components vary in truth relative to contexts of use, where the latter are n-tuples of a world, time, agent, location, standard of precision,

¹⁸⁹ See Kaplan (1989) and Lewis (1998). Although MacFarlane speaks of the truth of sentences, he is clear that strictly speaking, it is the propositions expressed by sentences that are the primary bearers of truth-values, as well as the contents of assertions and beliefs. See his (2014), pp. 71-72. In what follows, it should be kept in mind that when I refer to the truth of sentences, I am really referring to the truth of propositions expressed by sentences.

¹⁹⁰ Lewis (1998), p. 21.

¹⁹¹ Zimmerman (2007), pp. 316-317.

etc. To argue, as Zimmerman does, that any truth relativism deserving of the name must posit relativity above and beyond possible worlds would be to characterize theorists such as Kaplan and Lewis as relativists, a result which should strike us as objectionable.

We may argue that the relativist is anyone who accepts other parameters in addition to those mentioned above, but as MacFarlane points out, such a move begins to look ad hoc. The primary consideration is not whether the parameters in question are standard or non-standard, but rather how we treat them:

...it is not the *kind* of parameters to which one relativizes propositional truth that makes one a relativist, but rather what one does with them.¹⁹²

We are already familiar with the way in which various parameters form a context of use. MacFarlane's central contribution to the debate has been to point out that in addition to the fact that we can use a sentence at a context, we can also *assess* a use of that sentence at that or some other context. So, in addition to the already familiar notion of truth at contexts of use, Macfarlane argues that we must also consider truth at contexts of assessment. The truth of some class of sentences must therefore be "doubly-relativized" to both kinds of contexts.¹⁹³

However, we should avoid thinking of contexts of use and contexts of assessment as qualitatively different. For MacFarlane, whether a context should be characterized as one of use or assessment is determined by the role it is assigned, and not by which parameters are employed:

Ontologically speaking, contexts of use and contexts of assessment can be thought of as the same kind of thing. They might both, for example, be modeled as centered possible worlds (possible worlds with a designated time and agent or location). The qualifiers "of use" and "of assessment" distinguish two different roles a context can play in semantics. We can

¹⁹² MacFarlane (2014), p. 52.

¹⁹³ MacFarlane (2014), p. 60.

think of a context as a possible situation of *use* of a sentence, or as a possible situation of *assessment* of a use of a sentence.¹⁹⁴

In the context of use, the agent is the person using the sentence, i.e., the speaker, while in the context of assessment, the agent is the person assessing the use of the sentence for truth. For example, Abe may use the sentence “Licorice is tasty” at the context of use, while Ben may, either from the same context or from a different one at a later time, assess Abe’s use of this sentence. In such cases, there will be at least two contexts of assessment, i.e., that of the speaker and that of the assessor. We will consider shortly how MacFarlane thinks such cases should be handled.

It is important to note that on MacFarlane’s account, nothing about the context of use including the speaker’s intentions determines the relevant context of assessment. For this reason, although we may refer to the context of use (taken as the context in which the speaker used the sentence), strictly speaking it is not proper to speak of *the* context of assessment. On the contrary, there will be indefinitely many contexts of assessment, i.e., indefinitely many different contexts in which a speaker’s use of a sentence can be assessed. Accordingly, “...there is no ‘correct’ context from which to assess a particular speech act.”¹⁹⁵ We will consider the implications of this claim more in what follows.

Since on MacFarlane’s account the truth of a sentence may vary relative to both the context of use and context of assessment, there are two distinct ways in which the truth of a sentence is sensitive to contexts. Taking F to be some parameter of the context (world, time, agent, standard, etc.), we can now distinguish

(F -use-sensitivity) An expression is F -use-sensitive if its truth-value (relative to a context of use and context of assessment) depends on the F of the context of use.

¹⁹⁴ MacFarlane (2014), pp. 60-61.

¹⁹⁵ MacFarlane (2014), p. 62.

from

(*F*-assessment-sensitivity) An expression is *F*-assessment-sensitive if its truth-value (relative to a context of use and a context of assessment) depends on the *F* of the context of assessment.¹⁹⁶

To use one of MacFarlane's examples, the sentence "The US stock market plunged on 22 October 2008" is world-use sensitive, since its truth-value depends on the world of the context of use. This may initially seem puzzling due to the fact that sentences such as the above are usually thought of as contingent, varying in truth from world to world. However, MacFarlane points out that on his definition of use-sensitivity, every contingent sentence is use-sensitive, where the *F* in question is the world of the context of use.¹⁹⁷ MacFarlane labels as 'non-indexical contextualism' the view according to which the truth-value of the proposition expressed by a sentence varies with features of the context of use, even while the proposition stays constant. So, the sentence "The US stock market plunged on 22 October 2008" expresses the same proposition at every context of use, while its truth-value varies from world to world.

'Truth-value relativism,' on the other hand, is the view that the truth of some class of propositions is assessment-sensitive, i.e., their truth varies relative to features of contexts of assessment:

According to truth-value relativism, there is no absolute fact of the matter about whether a proposition, as used at a particular context, is true; it can be true as assessed from one context and false as assessed from another.¹⁹⁸

Ultimately, MacFarlane argues that the propositions expressed by sentences such as "Licorice is tasty" have this quality. His claim is that the propositions expressed by

¹⁹⁶ MacFarlane (2014), p. 64.

¹⁹⁷ See MacFarlane (2014), p. 64. MacFarlane takes this to be the point of Lewis' comment that "Contingency is a kind of indexicality." See Lewis (1998), p. 25.

¹⁹⁸ MacFarlane (2014), p. 73.

these sentences vary in truth relative to the standards of taste of the assessor(s). So, we can specify a context of assessment as consisting of a world, assessor, and the standards of taste of the assessor.

Finally, MacFarlane distinguishes sensitivity from indexicality. While sensitivity concerns the variance of *truth-values* of propositions in different contexts, indexicality concerns the variance of the *content* of sentences on different contexts. Keeping in mind the distinction between contexts of use and contexts of assessment, we can differentiate use-indexicality from assessment-indexicality. Again, the *F* in question may be a world, time, agent, standard, etc.

(*F*-use-indexical) An expression is *F*-use-indexical iff the content it expresses at a context depends on the *F* of that context.¹⁹⁹

Returning to our discussion of use-sensitivity, we can now see the interplay between use-sensitivity and use-indexicality in certain sentences. First, consider the sentence “I am over five feet tall.”²⁰⁰ This sentence is use-indexical, since the proposition expressed depends on the speaker (and perhaps also the time) at the context of use. But according to MacFarlane, it is also use-sensitive, since its truth-value varies depending on the context of use.

However, use-sensitivity and use-indexicality can also come apart, as seen in the following sentences. The sentence “If it is raining now, it is raining” is use-indexical because which proposition is expressed varies with the context of use. But since it is true at every context of use, it is not use-sensitive. On the other hand, the sentence “The US stock market plunged on 22 October 2008” is use-sensitive, since its truth depends on the world of the context of use. But it is not use-indexical, since it expresses the same

¹⁹⁹ MacFarlane (2014), p. 79.

²⁰⁰ The following examples all belong to MacFarlane (2014), pp. 79-80.

proposition at every context. So, a sentence may be both use-sensitive and use-indexical, or it may be either one without the other.

If we treat the matter of which propositions are expressed by sentences employing taste and aesthetic predicates as dependent on features of the context of use, then we will get the familiar view that we have referred to as ‘indexical contextualism.’ But in addition to the familiar sort of indexicality that arises from the context of use, MacFarlane posits an indexicality that arises from the context of assessment. Where c is some context of assessment,

(F -assessment-indexical) An expression is F -assessment-indexical iff the content it expresses as assessed from c depends on the F of c .

As already seen, MacFarlane favors treating sentences such as “Licorice is tasty” as assessment-sensitive. If we were instead to treat them as assessment-indexical, then the resulting view would be one in which the propositions expressed by such sentences vary with the context of assessment. MacFarlane has alternately referred to this view as ‘expressive relativism’ and ‘content relativism.’²⁰¹ However, notice that this view (which I will hereafter refer to as ‘content relativism’) faces similar problems regarding disagreement as those faced by the indexical contextualist. Since the proposition expressed by one person’s assertion of “Licorice is tasty” (relative to their context of assessment) will differ from someone else’s assertion of this same sentence (relative to their different context of assessment), the two speakers will fail to disagree.²⁰²

Thus far, we have seen how MacFarlane’s distinctions between different senses of sensitivity and indexicality make possible different treatments of sentences employing aesthetic and taste predicates. If we are indexical contextualists or content relativists,

²⁰¹ See his (2005a), p. 312, and (2014), pp. 72-76, respectively.

²⁰² See MacFarlane (2014), pp. 72-76 for additional objections.

then we will treat which propositions are expressed by such sentences as relative to features of the context of use or assessment, respectively. MacFarlane rejects both of these approaches. If we treat the truth-value of propositions expressed by such sentences as relative to features of the context of use of the speaker, then we are non-indexical contextualists. And finally, if we treat the truth-value of propositions expressed by such sentences as relative to features of the context of assessment of an assessor, then we are truth-value relativists. Only the last two options are plausible views according to MacFarlane, and so we will now examine them in more depth in the following section.

IV. Non-indexical contextualism versus truth-value relativism

As we have seen, MacFarlane believes that the primary consideration in characterizing relativism proper is not whether we include within our semantics parameters beyond worlds and times, since the foundational work of Kaplan and Lewis leaves room for ‘non-standard’ parameters such as standards of precision and even location. MacFarlane approvingly cites Kaplan’s statement that

What sorts of intensional operators to admit seems to me largely a matter of language engineering. It is a question of which features of what we intuitively think of as possible circumstances can be sufficiently well defined and isolated. If we wish to isolate location and regard it as a feature of possible circumstances we can introduce locational operators...²⁰³

But if standard semantics leaves room for such seemingly non-standard parameters, then MacFarlane asks what reason we have to think that additional parameters such as standards of taste or aesthetic standards should be excluded from consideration.²⁰⁴ For MacFarlane, the conclusion to draw is that there is no principled

²⁰³ Kaplan (1989), p. 504.

²⁰⁴ See MacFarlane (2014), pp. 81-88 for MacFarlane’s responses to various arguments against admitting such parameters into standard semantics.

objection to admitting such standards as features of context. However, to admit these standards into our semantics is not sufficient to make one a truth-value relativist, since as we have already seen, the question is not which parameters we include, but rather what role we assign them. Specifically, we can include standards of taste within our semantic theorizing without treating sentences employing taste predicates as assessment-sensitive. If we treat sentences such as “Licorice is tasty” as varying in truth-value relative to the world and the standard of taste of the speaker’s context of use, i.e., as use-sensitive, then we have not given any role to contexts of assessment. However, remember that for MacFarlane, assessment-sensitivity is the watermark of relativism proper.

MacFarlane labels the above position, whereby the relevant standards are determined by the speaker’s context of use, ‘non-indexical contextualism.’²⁰⁵ Contrary to indexical contextualism, which relativizes the content expressed by a sentence to contexts of use, non-indexical contextualism relativizes the truth of sentences expressing the same content to contexts of use. In short, an indexical contextualist regarding taste would treat the sentence “Licorice is tasty” as use-indexical, while a non-indexical contextualist would treat this sentence as use-sensitive. More formally, non-indexical contextualism is the view that

A sentence S is true at a context of use c iff S is true at c , $\langle w_c, s_c \rangle$, where w_c is the world of c and s_c is standard of the speaker of c .²⁰⁶

MacFarlane’s justification for considering both views to be variants of contextualism is that on both views it is the context of use that plays the central role, either of determining the content, or of assigning a truth-value:

²⁰⁵ See MacFarlane (2009), and (2014), pp. 88-92 for discussion.

²⁰⁶ MacFarlane (2014), p. 67.

Notice that the context *c* plays two distinct roles in determining sentence truth. First, it helps determine which proposition is expressed by the sentence. I'll call this the *content-determinative* role. Second, it tells us at which circumstances of evaluation we should evaluate this proposition to get a truth value for the sentence in context...I'll call this the *circumstance-determinative* role of context.²⁰⁷

In a sentence that is use-sensitive but not use-indexical, the context of use plays no role in the first step, i.e., in determining the content, but still affects the truth-value at the second step. However, the indexical and non-indexical contextualist agree that once we have established the content of a sentence and the relevant features of the context of use, the truth of the proposition is absolute.²⁰⁸

Crispin Wright has objected to MacFarlane's characterization of non-indexical contextualism as a species of contextualism. On the contrary, Wright states that

The terminology in the literature is already getting horribly tangled, and matters have not been helped by the choice of "non-indexical contextualism" by John MacFarlane to denote a type of view that is actually a variety of truth-relativism.²⁰⁹

Wright is certainly correct to draw attention to the unnecessarily confusing nature of the terminology employed in the literature on relativism. And MacFarlane is certainly guilty of this charge, considering the fact that within his own body of work, he changes names and labels many times, making the task of interpretation and exposition needlessly tedious. However, in defense of MacFarlane, it is not clear that Wright is correct to categorize his non-indexical contextualism as a variety of relativism.

The relativistic label is certainly not accurate on MacFarlane's terms, since he is quite clear that truth-value relativism requires consideration of contexts of assessment. But as we have seen, non-indexical contextualism assigns no role to these contexts.

²⁰⁷ MacFarlane (2009), p. 234.

²⁰⁸ MacFarlane (2014), p. 89.

²⁰⁹ Wright (2008a), p. 163, footnote 8.

Rather, the context of use is sufficient for determining the content and assigning it a truth-value. Further, as MacFarlane notes, what is true at a context of use is true absolutely, given non-indexical contextualism. This contradicts his own truth-value relativism, according to which

...there is no absolute fact of the matter about whether a proposition, as used at a particular context, is true; it can be true as assessed from one context and false as assessed from another.²¹⁰

Finally, at the most general level, the non-indexical contextualist can treat contingent sentences as use-sensitive, where the world is the relevant feature of the context. Although contingency posits a kind of relativity, it would be amiss to think of truth relative to possible worlds as relativism. But according to MacFarlane, there is no good reason to accept worlds (and maybe times) as permissible features of the context, but then to reject standards of taste. If he is right, then the line between commonplace varieties of relativity and controversial forms of relativism cannot be crossed by adding ‘non-standard’ parameters such as those of taste to our contexts.

However, it is not obvious that applications of non-indexical contextualism to sentences containing taste predicates are as uncontroversial as its application to contingent sentences. Even if the types of parameters in question do not make the difference between controversial and uncontroversial views, it may matter to which domain we apply our theory. Or it may matter how we construe the added parameters, a point I shall explore in the next section. Be this as it may, I will not attempt to settle the question of whether non-indexical contextualism is all things considered a variety of relativism. But whether it should be categorized as a variety of relativism, the view is

²¹⁰ MacFarlane (2014), p. 73.

distinct from MacFarlane's characterization of the latter. Formally, truth-value relativism is the view that

A sentence S is true as used at a context c_1 and assessed from a context c_2 iff S is true at c_1 , $\langle w_{c_1}, s_{c_2} \rangle$, where w_{c_1} is the world of c_1 and s_{c_2} is the standard of the assessor of c_2 .²¹¹

MacFarlane sometimes misleadingly speaks of the resulting “doubly relativized” truth as truth relative to the context of use and context of assessment. However, this phrasing leaves it unclear which features of each context are relevant to the truth-value relativist. The above formalization makes this point clearer by specifying that it is the world of the context of use and the standards of the context of assessment that are relevant.

We can now see that the difference between the non-indexical contextualist and the relativist is slight but significant. Both agree regarding the content expressed by the sentence in question. However, while for the non-indexical contextualist it is the speaker's context of use that picks out the relevant standards, for the relativist the relevant standards are picked out by the assessor's context of assessment. For the former, a sentence is true if it is true at the world and standards of the context of use, while for the latter, a sentence is true if it is true at the world of the context of use and the standards of the context of assessment. Assessment-sensitive sentences do not have truth-values absolutely, but only relative to contexts of assessment.

In Chapter 6, I will examine in more detail the relationship that MacFarlane tries to establish between his relativism and the practice of assertion. But for the time being, it is worth offering a rough sketch of his approach. According to MacFarlane, when we assess someone's use of an assessment-sensitive sentence for truth, what matters is the

²¹¹ MacFarlane (2014), p. 67.

world of the context of use and *our*, i.e., the assessor's, standards of taste. For example, suppose that Abe asserts "Licorice is tasty," and that this claim is true relative to the standards at his context of use. At a later point, Ben assesses the truth of Abe's assertion of this sentence. What matters for Ben is whether or not Abe's assertion is true relative to *Ben's* standards, and not whether the claim is true relative to Abe's original standards. In assessing each other's assertions, we examine them for truth relative to our own standards, and not truth relative to the standards of the speaker.

Although MacFarlane believes that non-indexical contextualism offers certain advantages over other approaches, e.g., indexical contextualism, he ultimately finds it inadequate. The primary reason is that he wants to maintain the distinction between using a sentence at a particular context, and assessing that same sentence for truth at a later context. Unfortunately, non-indexical contextualism assigns no role in the determination of truth-values to contexts of assessment, all of the work being done by the context of use. By assigning a role to contexts of assessment, MacFarlane now takes himself to have crossed the divide into an interesting and controversial variety of truth-relativism.

At this stage, I want to point out the fact that MacFarlane's relativism lacks the problematic features of being self-undermining or logically inconsistent. His relativism is engineered to handle specific kinds of expressions and is not reflexive. As he explicitly points out,

There are no worries about self-refutation here, because we may suppose ourselves to be describing the "relativistic" language in a meta-language devoid of assessment sensitivity.²¹²

²¹² MacFarlane (2005a), p. 322, footnote 19.

Now that we have explained and laid out the central motivations for MacFarlane's view, we can begin to offer some criticisms. In the next section, I want to consider a few preliminary worries before addressing the central matter of disagreement.

V. Truth and taste

There is a natural relationship between our ascriptions of tastiness to certain things and our behaviors and affective responses. In particular, we expect someone who declares his fondness for something to find it pleasing, at least under normal conditions.²¹³ This underlies our intuition that there is something odd about a situation in which someone declares himself fond of ice cream while expressing (in speech or behavior) his disgust for it. Surely, our ascriptions of tastiness and our emotional and behavioral responses should not come apart in this way, and cases in which they do should lead us to suspect that the speaker has misused the meanings of key terms such as "ice cream" or "tasty," or has misunderstood the proper relationship between our ascriptions and responses. As we develop into competent language users, we learn how to avoid these sorts of mistakes. According to MacFarlane, something like the following principle therefore seems to guide our intuitions about the proper use of taste predicates:

(TP) If you know first-hand how something tastes, call it "tasty" just in case its flavor is pleasing to you, and "not tasty" just in case its favor is not pleasing to you.²¹⁴

This seems a reasonable principle regardless of whether we are objectivists, contextualists, or relativists. Since MacFarlane defends the latter position, he must make

²¹³ Here we must be careful. People with food allergies may find something delicious even while knowing that it will make them sick. However, there is a difference between saying "Bread is delicious, but it makes me sick," and "Bread is delicious, but I hate the way it tastes." The latter sentence, and not the former, sounds odd because our use of taste predicates carries with it the idea that we enjoy the taste of those things we describe as "tasty." But we may consistently enjoy the taste of something (and hence describe it as "tasty") even while knowing that it makes us feel unwell.

²¹⁴ MacFarlane (2014), p. 4.

sure that his own relativistic account of taste predicates preserves the intuitions underlying (TP). We have seen in the above sections that MacFarlane argues that the truth of sentences containing taste predicates must be doubly relativized to the world and time of the context of use and the standard of taste of the assessor. But what is a standard of taste, and how should the relativist think of the connection between our tastes and the truth of sentences containing taste predicates in a way that respects (TP)? We can begin with the first question. According to MacFarlane,

I take it that a taste is a kind of *standard*—a gustatory standard—and I will sometimes use that label instead of “taste.” Talk of a standard can suggest something intellectual: a set of principles the agent uses in assessing whether something is tasty. Nothing like that is intended here. Think of a standard, rather, as something that determines a scale...One’s tastes, too, serve as a gustatory standard, quite independently of whether one can articulate this standard. It is possible that our gustatory standards depend to a significant degree on brute physiological differences, though they are also shaped greatly by our experiences with food.²¹⁵

The notion of taste for MacFarlane is the familiar one that we use when we say that someone has “good taste,” “undeveloped taste,” or even “no taste.” Rather than standards consisting of sets of abstract principles, he seems to think of them as more like sets of preferences.²¹⁶ In judging which things we find tasty or disgusting, we do not consult principles. On the contrary, our reactions to certain foods and drinks are much more *immediate*. One might say that we taste with our stomach, and not our head.²¹⁷

Taking our standards of taste in this way explains their fluidity, the fact that they change over time in response to our experiences and emotions. But however they

²¹⁵ MacFarlane (2014), pp. 143-144.

²¹⁶ Although taste and epistemology both have a normative component, the nature of the standards or criteria in each domain may differ in this way. While standards of taste are more akin to sets of what are often idiosyncratic preferences, epistemic standards or frameworks are better thought of as sets of principles. See Pritchard (2009), who takes epistemic frameworks in this sense.

²¹⁷ MacFarlane is more sensitive to these issues than Kölbel seems to be. See my discussion of Kölbel in Chapter 3, Section IV.

change, for MacFarlane, the relationship between our tastes and preferences is analytic: to like the flavor of something is to positively evaluate it in light of one's standard of taste, i.e., preferences. This much seems uncontroversial, but matters get trickier when we turn to our second question, i.e., how MacFarlane connects standards of taste to the truth of sentences. His view of the matter is as follows. In order for the sentence "Licorice is tasty" to be true, it must be true relative to the world/time of the context of use, and the standard of taste of the assessor's current context of assessment.

Truth relative to the world and time of use is familiar from standard semantics, and we can put this issue to one side for the sake of argument. But truth relative to contexts of assessment is a more controversial notion, or so I shall argue. Specifically, what does it mean for a proposition to be true relative to someone's standard of taste?²¹⁸

MacFarlane's answer is the following:

...the proposition that licorice is tasty is true (as used at and assessed from my current context) just in case I like the flavor of licorice.²¹⁹

Notice that the above step from what we like to what is true (relative to an assessor's standard of taste) is distinct from MacFarlane's earlier point that what we like is what we positively evaluate in light of our standards of taste. While the move from what we like to what we positively evaluate seems reasonable, MacFarlane's move from what we like to what is true seems problematic.

An initial problem is that by linking truth to an agent's likes and dislikes, MacFarlane's account puts truth on very unstable footing. As empirical studies have amply shown, human psychology is highly susceptible to subtle, non-rational influences.

²¹⁸ In what follows, I will follow MacFarlane and speak of the truth of propositions rather than sentences, but nothing of substance hinges on this.

²¹⁹ MacFarlane (2014), p. 159.

Our preferences can be manipulated in a host of ways that are often cognitively inaccessible to us, with the result that MacFarlane's relative truth will be subject to radical and often unpredictable changes. To mention one way in which our tastes can be influenced, consider the fact that the extent to which we enjoy eating something can vary dramatically depending on the context in which we experience it. Imagine eating a filet mignon in the middle of a landfill, or a piece of chocolate cake out of a baby's diaper (albeit an unused one). The extent of our enjoyment will likely vary greatly with these different conditions, with the result that the truth of whether filet mignon is delicious may change in the time it takes one to walk a safe distance from the garbage heap. This is a serious problem for MacFarlane's account, since he places truth at the mercy of highly-manipulatable human psychology.

Further, we do not in general think that our affective responses imply what is true or false about the object in question. To use an example reminiscent of Plato, the fact that a wind strikes us as cold does not imply that it is true that the wind is cold. The relativist may respond that it is *true for* the person who experiences the wind as such, but this claim is notoriously difficult to make intelligible.²²⁰ I will say something about the intelligibility of MacFarlane's view shortly, but here I want to draw attention to a separate worry. Perceptual errors are an ever-present possibility. In so far as our likes and dislikes require some first-hand experience with the items in question (see MacFarlane's (TP), above), then it seems that the possibility of error should be present. After all, in order for us to be warranted in calling something "tasty," we must have experience with it, i.e., we must first have tasted it. But on MacFarlane's account, it is simply not possible to be in error about whether something is tasty, provided the agent in

²²⁰ See Meiland (1977) for one (unsuccessful) attempt.

question likes its flavor. To strike one as tasty and to *be* tasty are equivalent. I will return to this point in my discussion of MacFarlane's treatment of disagreement. But independent of this issue, it strikes me as problematic that MacFarlane's account does not obviously leave room for the possibility of error in matters of taste.²²¹

In ordinary cases of perception, truth and the possibility of error go hand in hand. On the basis of visual experience, we may form the belief that a spoon placed in a glass of water is bent. However, this belief is shown to be false when the spoon is removed from the glass and we see that it is actually straight. For MacFarlane, the truth of judgments about what is tasty requires first-hand experience of the items in question. If claims of what is tasty can be true, then in light of our fallible natures it seems plausible to think that we are sometimes mistaken about their truth. But if our beliefs about what is tasty are true just in case we enjoyed that thing's flavor, then there is no possibility of forming a false belief about whether something is tasty as long as we liked it. Since liking something and it being true (relative to one's tastes) that it is tasty are equivalent, no one could ever like the flavor of something and be wrong about whether it is tasty.

Technical differences aside, this view bears some similarities to Protagoreanism.²²² If we take Plato's summary as accurate, then Protagoras held the view that knowledge is perception, or that things are for each person as they seem to be.

²²¹ Insofar as taste requires use of one's sensory faculties, the possibility of error in matters of taste brings to mind the famous debate between C.I. Lewis and Nelson Goodman concerning the question of whether there are elements of perceptual experience about which we can be certain, i.e., "the given." See Lewis (1952) and Goodman (1952). Lewis argued that while we can be mistaken about the way that things are, we can be certain about the way that things *seem* to us. That is, the possibility of error does not extend to perceptual seemings. MacFarlane's view of truth ultimately commits him to the stronger claim that the way things seem entails something about the way things are: if something seems pleasant to an agent, then it is true (for them) that it is tasty. So, while Lewis thought that we cannot be in error about what seems to us, MacFarlane is committed to the view that we cannot be in error about the truth of the matter relative to our tastes, provided something seems tasty to us.

²²² See my Chapter 1, Section IV.

MacFarlane's view, although here restricted to matters of taste, ultimately takes a similar stand. Both views relativize the truth of certain claims to how things seem to the perceiver, i.e., taster, and both views undermine the plausible distinction between true and false beliefs in matters of taste. Beliefs about what is tasty are by definition true for the person having those tastes, with the result that saying such a belief is true is a tautology, while saying it is false is a contradiction. These seem unacceptable consequences of a MacFarlane's treatment of taste predicates.

On MacFarlane's view, for any person, if they like the flavor of something, then it is true relative to their standard of taste that it is tasty. One possible worry is that propositions concerning matters of taste are not truth-apt in the first place. This objection is familiar from expressivist treatments of taste predicates, but it is not the one with which I am here concerned.²²³ The real worry concerns how we are supposed to understand what it means for such assessment-sensitive expressions to be true in MacFarlane's doubly relativized sense. Here he faces the familiar challenge of making the notion of relative truth intelligible.

I want to press a worry regarding MacFarlane's notion of standards and the role they play in determining the truth of sentences. As noted, MacFarlane takes himself to be using our ordinary sense of "standard of taste." Although normal conversation rarely requires us to explicitly define what we mean by a standard of taste, one reasonable thought is that a standard of taste is simply a set of preferences, our likes and dislikes. We can make sense of sentences such as "That steak was bland by Brad's standards"

²²³ This general sort of worry regarding the truth-aptness of expressions concerning matters of taste can be raised against the objectivist just as well as the relativist. But here I am concerned with problems specifically for the relativist.

along these lines. I now want to question whether we can make sense out of the idea that propositions can be true relative to standards taken as sets of preferences.

Notice that our thoughts about what constitutes a standard in matters of taste differ from our thoughts about what constitutes a standard in other domains, e.g., epistemology. Consider the contextualist's treatment of the claim that "Brad knows his car is parked in the garage." Whether this sentence is true depends on whether or not Brad does in fact have knowledge of the whereabouts of his car, and whether he has knowledge depends on whether the contextually relevant epistemic standards are high or low. In a low standard, Brad may have knowledge, while in a high standard he may not. We may in either case think of the truth of the above sentence as (in part) relative to standards. But the standards in question are not sets of preferences or likes and dislikes of Brad or some third-person observer. On the contrary, they are taken to be sets of epistemic principles used to determine whether a subject has knowledge. Once we have determined which standards are relevant for the evaluation of whether Brad has knowledge, the truth or falsity of the sentence will be of the usual kind, requiring no controversial stance on truth. The above sketch shows that we can make sense of truth relative to standards, taken as sets of principles.

Remember that MacFarlane explicitly rejects the thought that a standard of taste is "...a set of principles the agent uses in assessing whether something is tasty."²²⁴ This account would overly intellectualize standards of taste, which are better taken in our familiar sense as sets of likes and dislikes. But does it make sense to think of the truth of the sentence "Licorice is tasty" as relative to a subject's likes and dislikes? In a way, it does. Consider one possible contextualist treatment of "Licorice is tasty." If we take this

²²⁴ MacFarlane (2014), p. 143.

sentence to be elliptical for another nearby sentence, e.g., “Brad likes the taste of licorice,” then this latter sentence will be true or false depending on whether Brad does in fact like licorice. Brad’s likes and dislikes are objective facts about Brad, and we can think of his standard of taste as a list of these objective facts. We can then examine his preferences to find out whether a liking for licorice is present, in which case the sentence is true, or absent, in which case it is false.

The controversial move is to take the former sentence to be elliptical for the latter, but once this is done, the contextualist can assess the latter sentence for truth in the standard sort of way. By shifting the emphasis from licorice to Brad, the contextualist can explain the truth of sentences containing taste predicates without requiring any relativistic account of truth. So, speaking loosely, there is a way in which the truth of “Licorice is tasty” is relative to a person’s preferences, but only because we are shifting our emphasis from this sentence to another that is then assigned a truth value in the usual way.

MacFarlane of course takes a different approach. Rather than moving from “Licorice is tasty” to “Brad likes licorice” and then assessing the latter in the usual way, he wants to move from “Brad likes licorice” to “Licorice is tasty” is true for Brad, i.e., relative to Brad’s preferences.²²⁵ We are now supposed to be saying something about licorice, rather than about Brad and his tastes. But what is the relationship between Brad’s liking licorice, and it being true (relative to his standards) that licorice is tasty? More generally, why should the fact that Brad likes licorice have *any* implications for whether it is true that licorice is tasty regardless of whether we think of truth as

²²⁵ I have framed the difference in terms of sentences, rather than MacFarlane’s use of propositions, but nothing of consequence hinges on this.

relativistic or absolute? Liking is one thing; truth is another. Assuming that it is a fact about Brad that he likes licorice, then the most this would permit is an inference to the claim that it is true that Brad likes licorice.

MacFarlane carefully avoids any reference to facts in his discussion of the truth of assessment-sensitive sentences, and it is not hard to see why. If propositions are true in virtue of facts, then it is hard to make sense of the claim that a subject's affective responses are also relevant. Propositions represent the world as being a certain way, and it is not clear what it means for a proposition to correctly represent some piece of the world, i.e., licorice, relative to someone's preferences. As seen, we can make sense of the claim "Brad likes licorice" by appealing to Brad's tastes, taken as objective facts about him. But this is distinct from the claim "Licorice is tasty," which is about a bit of the world. Here, facts about licorice seem relevant, and not facts about Brad. Even on MacFarlane's account, we are predicating tastiness of licorice. We are, after all, making a claim about licorice, rather than about some subject's experience of it. But if it is a fact about licorice that it is tasty, then the claim that licorice is tasty will be true *simpliciter*, and no relativization to a subject's standards or preferences is necessary.²²⁶

Not only is the relationship between the truth of propositions concerning taste and our preferences unclear, it is unclear what such relativized truth has to do with truth as ordinarily conceived. Either MacFarlane is offering an account of truth in line with ordinary usage, or not. However, our ordinary conception of what it means for a claim to be true does not require any reference to our personal likes and dislikes. His doubly relativized account of truth is a technical device engineered to handle assessment-sensitive expressions. But then the worry becomes what relationship such doubly

²²⁶ For additional discussion, see Wright's (2006) and (2008a).

relativized truth bears to truth as ordinarily conceived. These are fair questions to ask. However, since MacFarlane does not think that truth (whether relativistic or absolute) can be explicated in simpler terms, he tries a less direct route to making his conception of truth intelligible. Rather than break his account of truth into smaller explanatory pieces, he argues that we can gain a reasonable grasp of truth at contexts of use and assessment by investigating the normative role that it plays in the practice of assertion:

Granted that our doubly relativized truth predicate is not the ordinary (monadic) truth predicate we use in ordinary speech, but a piece of technical vocabulary, we need to say something about how it is connected up with other parts of our theories of language and communication, so we can see the practical significance of going for a relativist semantic theory as opposed to a nonrelativist one.²²⁷

I will therefore shelve concerns regarding intelligibility for the time being, and wait until Chapter 6 to consider MacFarlane's account of assertion. I will now turn to a discussion of MacFarlane's treatment of disagreement.

VI. Relativism and disagreement

Recall that MacFarlane objected to indexical contextualism on the grounds that this view has trouble explaining how there can be genuine disagreement over matters of taste, since two speakers who are merely asserting what tastes good *to them* are not disagreeing with each other. Further, the indexical contextualist has trouble explaining why we would bother arguing about what is tasty if all we could really be doing is arguing about what we each find tasty. With regard to these points, MacFarlane thinks that truth-value relativism can better vindicate our intuitions about disagreement and argumentation in matters of taste without losing the subjective quality of such judgments. Let us see whether this is right.

²²⁷ MacFarlane (2014), p. 94.

MacFarlane begins by pointing out that although we often think of disagreement as a monolithic phenomenon, this is the wrong view of the matter. Disagreement is multifaceted. Rather than ask, “What is disagreement?” we should instead ask, “What kinds of disagreement are there?”²²⁸ Broadly, we can distinguish what we might call affective disagreements (when one person responds positively to p while another responds negatively to p) from doxastic disagreements (when one person believes p and another disbelieves p). Recall that while the expressivist can capture the former sense of disagreement, MacFarlane does not think this is sufficient because mere affective disagreement cannot explain the phenomenon of retraction. So, he wants his own view to be able to make sense of doxastic disagreement.

There are two kinds of disagreement that MacFarlane is interested in securing.

The first is what he calls

(Doxastic noncotenability) To disagree with someone’s belief that p is to have beliefs whose contents are jointly incompatible with p .²²⁹

In this sense of disagreement, a person disagrees with someone if she could not coherently maintain her own belief, and adopt the other person’s belief as well. MacFarlane illustrates this kind of disagreement with the following example. Suppose that George believes that all bankers are rich, while Sally believes that Vern is a poor banker. Sally’s belief is noncotenable with George’s in the sense that George could not coherently adopt Sally’s belief Vern is a poor banker without dropping his own belief that all bankers are rich.²³⁰ In this example, although Sally and George’s beliefs do not directly contradict each other, they imply a contradiction: Sally’s belief that Vern is a

²²⁸ See MacFarlane (2007), and (2014), Chapter 6.

²²⁹ MacFarlane (2014), p. 121.

²³⁰ Ibid.

poor banker implies that there is at least one poor banker, and this latter claim directly contradicts George's belief that all bankers are rich. However, as we will see below, MacFarlane also accepts direct contradictions between a belief that p and a belief that $\text{not-}p$ as examples of doxastic nontenability.

According to MacFarlane, doxastic nontenability is likely what many philosophers have in mind when they think of disagreement.²³¹ But it is not the only kind. We can also think of disagreements as taking place within specific contexts. As a result, MacFarlane distinguishes disagreement in the sense of doxastic noncotenability from disagreement in the sense in which one person's having a true belief blocks or 'precludes' someone else's also having a true belief.

MacFarlane labels as "accurate" a belief or assertion that is true at a context. Accuracy is a technical notion connected to MacFarlane's earlier discussion of the truth of beliefs and assertions. Roughly, for a belief or assertion to be accurate is for it to be true at the context that is relevant. For MacFarlane, the context that matters is of course that of the assessor. More formally,

(Accuracy) An attitude or speech act occurring at c_1 is accurate, as assessed from a context c_2 , just in case its content is true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 .²³²

So, disagreement in the sense of preclusion of accuracy means that if one person's belief or assertion is accurate, then someone else's cannot also be accurate. To illustrate the difference between doxastic noncotenability and preclusion of accuracy, MacFarlane uses the following example.²³³ Suppose that at 2 PM, Andy believes the proposition *I am eating a sandwich*, and that at 3 PM, Dave believes the proposition *I am not eating a*

²³¹ For example, see Kölbel (2004).

²³² MacFarlane (2014), p. 127.

²³³ MacFarlane (2014), p. 125.

sandwich. According to MacFarlane, there is disagreement in the sense of doxastic noncotenability, since neither Andy nor Dave can accept each other's belief without dropping his own. However, it may nevertheless be the case that both their beliefs are accurate relative to their different contexts, and so there is not disagreement in the sense of preclusion of accuracy.

Unfortunately, this example is not sufficient to show that we do not have disagreement in the sense of preclusion of accuracy because MacFarlane actually distinguishes two ways in which the accuracy of one person's belief may preclude the accuracy of someone else's. The first is what he calls

(Preclusion of joint accuracy) The accuracy of my doxastic attitudes (as assessed from any context) precludes the accuracy of your attitude or speech act (as assessed from that same context).²³⁴

Here, what matters for the determination of whether two beliefs or assertions are both accurate is whether they can both be true relative to the *same* context of assessment, regardless of which context we pick. MacFarlane distinguishes this from

(Preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy) The accuracy of my attitudes (as assessed from my context) precludes the accuracy of your attitude or speech act (as assessed from your context).²³⁵

On this latter reading, what matters is whether or not two beliefs or assertions can both be accurate relative to *different* contexts of assessment. There are therefore two distinct senses in which persons may disagree in the sense of preclusion of accuracy, and we can now return to MacFarlane's example. His claim that Andy and Dave are not disagreeing in the sense of preclusion of accuracy must be qualified. They are not disagreeing if we have in mind preclusion of joint reflexive accuracy, since both of their

²³⁴ MacFarlane (2014), p. 129.

²³⁵ MacFarlane (2014), p. 130.

beliefs are accurate relative to different contexts of assessment. The accuracy of Andy's belief relative to his context in no way prevents the accuracy of Dave's belief relative to his different context. On the other hand, if we have in mind preclusion of joint accuracy, then Andy and Dave *are* disagreeing, since regardless of whose context of assessment we pick it cannot be the case that both of their beliefs are accurate, i.e., true.

At any rate, MacFarlane thinks that his relativism can secure disagreement in matters of taste in the senses of doxastic noncotenability and preclusion of joint accuracy. The former sense of disagreement is possible because unlike indexical contextualism, truth-value relativism does not result in a change of content from one believer to another. So, if Yum believes the proposition that *licorice is tasty* while Yuk believes that *licorice is not tasty*, neither could adopt the other's belief without dropping his own. The latter sort of disagreement is possible because for the relativist, accuracy varies with contexts of assessment:

The relativist...denies that accuracy is an absolute matter. A belief or assertion in *c* can only be said to be accurate relative to a context of assessment: it is accurate, as assessed from a context *c'*, just in case its content is true at the world of *c* and the taste of the agent of *c'* (the assessor). If Yum and Yuk believe incompatible propositions, then, there will be no context of assessment relative to which both beliefs are accurate.²³⁶

When Yum and Yuk disagree, only the taste of the assessor is relevant for evaluating the accuracy of the claim. Relative to the standard of taste picked out by Yum's context of assessment, Yum's belief that licorice is tasty is accurate and Yuk's contradictory belief is inaccurate. However, relative to the standard of taste picked out by Yuk's context of assessment, Yuk's belief that licorice is not tasty is accurate and Yum's contradictory belief is inaccurate. So, regardless of whether Yum or Yuk is the

²³⁶ MacFarlane (2014), p. 129.

assessor, it cannot be the case that both beliefs are accurate relative to either's context of assessment.

We are now ready to raise some challenges to MacFarlane's treatment of disagreement. I will focus my discussion on the matter of beliefs, and then consider the role of assertions in Chapter 6. First, even granting that his truth-value relativism secures doxastic noncotenability and preclusion of joint accuracy, it is not clear that we should follow MacFarlane in thinking of these as different *kinds* of disagreement. Rather, they seem more correctly taken to be necessary conditions of disagreement. What justifies thinking of these as necessary conditions is the fact that both rely on the notion that disagreement is possible only where the propositions believed are contradictory, i.e., they cannot both be true. Doxastic noncotenability captures the idea that if A disagrees with B, then neither person can simply adopt the other's belief while maintaining their own, since their beliefs are "jointly incompatible," or contradictory. Preclusion of joint accuracy relies on the notion of contradictory beliefs as well. The reason that Andy and Dave's beliefs cannot both be accurate, i.e., true, relative to any context is that their beliefs contradict each other.

But this does not show that either condition is sufficient for a *kind* of disagreement, intuitively understood. Remember that on MacFarlane's view, Andy and Dave will count as disagreeing in both senses. However, the intuitively compelling conclusion is that they are *not* disagreeing because both of their beliefs can be accurate relative to their different contexts.²³⁷ On the other hand, if we think that Yum and Yuk are engaged in a genuine disagreement over the tastiness of licorice, then it does not seem

²³⁷ In his (2007), p. 25, MacFarlane agrees that mutual accuracy relative to different contexts undermines the sense of genuine disagreement. However, in his (2014), he instead argues that mutual accuracy is consistent with certain *kinds* of disagreement.

that we should allow the possibility that both of their beliefs are accurate. Although this case presents us with doxastic noncotenability and preclusion of joint accuracy, it does not seem to present us with a case of disagreement if we take both Yum and Yuk to be accurate relative to their different contexts of assessment. Doxastic noncotenability and preclusion of joint accuracy are necessary conditions of disagreement, and not sufficient conditions for different kinds of disagreement.

Contrary to MacFarlane, what matters for disagreement is the possibility of mutual accuracy *simpliciter*, and not whether mutual accuracy is possible within any single context of assessment. Underlying these claims is the thought that if A and B are disagreeing, then they hold contradictory beliefs, i.e., their beliefs cannot both be true (accurate). If both their beliefs can be true (accurate), then A and B are not disagreeing. We can organize these thoughts into an argumentative structure similar to the one I offered against Kölbel:²³⁸

- (1) If A and B are having a disagreement regarding p , then A and B are contradicting each other—A believes p while B believes not- p (Assumption).
- (2) If A and B are contradicting each other, then it cannot be the case that both of their beliefs are accurate (Assumption).
- (3) If A and B are having a disagreement regarding p , then it cannot be the case that both of their beliefs are accurate (by 1 and 2).
- (4) Suppose that accuracy is relativized to contexts of assessment (Assumption).
- (5) If accuracy is relativized to contexts of assessment, then it can be the case that both of their beliefs are accurate.
- (6) It can be the case that both of their beliefs are accurate (by 4 and 5).
- (7) Therefore, A and B are not contradicting each other (by 2 and 6).
- (8) Therefore, A and B are not having a disagreement regarding p (by 1 and 7).

As with Kölbel, the pivotal premises for MacFarlane are (1), (2), (4), and (5). I have argued that a tacit acceptance of (1) seems to underlie MacFarlane's motivations for thinking that doxastic noncotenability and preclusion of joint accuracy are kinds of

²³⁸ See Chapter 3, Section VI.

disagreement. MacFarlane has argued at length for (4), and he accepts (5) as a consequence of his relativism. So, he must reject premise (2) if he is to block the conclusion, which would amount to showing that two people can hold contradictory beliefs that are both true. But how might he do this?

It is definitional that if two propositions are contradictory, then they cannot both be true. Equivalently, if they can both be true (say, relative to different contexts of assessment), then they are not contradictory. MacFarlane's intention to reconcile a relativized account of accuracy with the claim that the parties involved are contradicting each other requires a non-standard account of contradiction whereby p and not- p may both be true. This requires rather dramatic revision to one of our fundamental logical notions, and MacFarlane has neither attempted any such revision, nor does he even seem to recognize the need for such revision.

Recall that for MacFarlane, the fundamental problem for the indexical contextualist was in explaining the existence of disagreement. This problem is generated by the fact that for the indexical contextualist, the content of our beliefs shifts from one person to another. But on my reading of the problem, this is not the deepest reason for lost disagreement. The most basic reason is rather that a shift in content means that the parties involved no longer believe inconsistent propositions, since both of their beliefs may be true. MacFarlane makes this point as well:

If the truth of my claim that a food is “tasty” depends on how it strikes *me*, while the truth of your claim that the same food is “not tasty” depends on how it strikes *you*, then our claims are compatible, and we do not disagree in making them.²³⁹

²³⁹ MacFarlane (2014), p. 8.

If this is the correct diagnosis of contextualism's problem with disagreement, then it should be recognized that MacFarlane's relativism has the same problem. Since both A and B's beliefs can be accurate relative to their different contexts of assessment, they are not contradicting each other. But without contradicting each other, they are not disagreeing, as MacFarlane himself recognizes in the case of contextualism. The upshot is that if both A and B's beliefs are accurate relative to their respective standards of taste, then they are not contradicting each other, and hence are not engaged in a genuine disagreement.²⁴⁰ Recall Wright's question for the relativist trying to preserve disagreement over disputed propositions:

What is the relevant notion of propositional identity, and how is it possible rationally to affirm the truth of such a proposition consistently with allowing that someone else's denial of it is also true?²⁴¹

Once Yum and Yuk recognize the truth of each other's beliefs relative to their own contexts of assessment, and further, that their own contexts of assessment are relevant for evaluating the truth of each other's beliefs, then the only clear way for them to proceed would be to shift the disagreement from their beliefs to their contexts of assessment. However, MacFarlane, like the other relativists we have examined, denies that there is any way to pick out a privileged or correct standard. Nothing, including the speaker's intentions, picks out a "correct" context from which to assess a particular speech act [or belief].²⁴² While different assessors will have different standards, there is no sense in which one person's belief that something is tasty can be *more accurate* than someone else's belief that it is not.

²⁴⁰ Recall Stojanovic's comment that "Disagreement is genuine only when the one party's being right entails that the other party is wrong." Stojanovic (2007), p. 692.

²⁴¹ See Wright (2006), p. 54.

²⁴² MacFarlane (2014), p. 62.

So, Yum and Yuk can recognize the truth of both their beliefs, and the fact that the standards each uses to assess their beliefs are no better or worse than any other. But having gone this far, it is no longer clear how they could take themselves to be disagreeing. As MacFarlane himself notes, "...having a disagreement requires taking oneself to be in disagreement."²⁴³ But how can the parties to a disagreement take themselves to be disagreeing once they recognize that their beliefs, though incompatible, are both accurate relative to different standards; and further, that there is no way for them to decide whose standards are 'correct'? Once the disputants have reached this stage, it is unclear in what sense they can continue to disagree with each other.

Closely connected to the practice of disagreement is argumentation. Remember that part of MacFarlane's evidence against contextualism arose from the fact that it could not explain why we bother to *argue* about what is tasty:

"Brussels sprouts, tasty? They taste like grass! Do you also say that grass is tasty? Doesn't their bitterness completely overwhelm other flavors?" We do not generally argue with others' claims about what tastes good to *them*, so the fact that we argue about what is "tasty" speaks against the contextualist analysis.²⁴⁴

But can truth-value relativism do a better job of explaining the sense in arguing over matters of taste? Parties to an argument are most straightforwardly taken as each believing that the other person is guilty of holding a false belief. In attempting to persuade each other of the falsity of their beliefs, they exchange reasons back and forth, as shown in MacFarlane's above example. But on his account, it is possible for two disputants, e.g., Yum and Yuk, both to have accurate beliefs relative to their different standards of taste. So, both Yum and Yuk's beliefs will be true relative to their standards

²⁴³ MacFarlane (2014), p. 120.

²⁴⁴ MacFarlane (2014), p. 11.

of taste just in case they like, and do not like licorice, respectively. But once Yum and Yuk have recognized that both of their beliefs are accurate relative to their own standards of taste, on what grounds can they sensibly continue to argue with each other? If their attempts at persuasion are successful, then they will have talked each other out of what is for them a true belief.

The conclusion I want to reach is that MacFarlane's account ultimately leaves very little room for rational argument over what is tasty. Our likes and dislikes are formed largely on the basis of experience, and when our preferences change, this has more to do with psychology, physiology, and personal idiosyncrasies than reasons. Or more specifically, changes in taste seem to have little to do with the sorts of reasons that tell in favor of a proposition's truth. In essence, MacFarlane admits this much. He favors Gibbard's evolutionary account of normative judgment to explain the social function of assessment sensitive expressions. According to Gibbard,

Evolutionary considerations suggest this: consensus may promote biological fitness, but only consensus of the right kind. The consensus must be mutually fitness-enhancing, and so to move toward it we must be responsive to things that promote our biological fitness. We should expect, then, that in fact the judgments that emerge from normative discussion will be responsive to pragmatic considerations: to the sorts of things that tended, among our ancestors, toward reproductive success.²⁴⁵

MacFarlane theorizes that assessment sensitive expressions are designed to create controversy, and due to the perhaps "brute psychological" fact that controversy is uncomfortable, we seek to coordinate our contexts of assessment through disagreement and argumentation. Disagreement and argumentation serve the function of leading us to a consensus, and there is practical value in sharing standards of taste, beauty, and humor:

²⁴⁵ Gibbard (1990), p. 223.

Assessment-sensitive expressions exploit this psychological fact about us—our tendency to treat dispute as a crisis to be resolved—to foster subjective coordination by provoking controversy.²⁴⁶

The sorts of considerations that motivate us to switch contexts of assessment are not those that tell in favor of the truth of someone else's belief or the falsity of our own, since MacFarlane is considering situations in which neither party has mistakenly assessed the truth of some proposition relative to his own standards. He notes that

If you say 'skiing is fun' and I contradict you, it is not because I think that the proposition you asserted is false as assessed by you in your current situation, with the affective attitudes you now have, but because I hope to change those attitudes.²⁴⁷

According to MacFarlane, in arguing over the truth of assessment sensitive propositions, we aim to change each other's beliefs, but not by appealing to reasons that show that anyone's belief is false. But given the emphasis placed on the psychological function of assessment sensitive expressions, why does MacFarlane bother with the notion of truth (relative or otherwise) at all? If the aim of assessment sensitive expressions is to influence others on the basis of pragmatic reasons, then truth is an idle wheel. After all, coordination of contexts can be effectively reached without anything more substantive than the appearance of truth. So what role is served by truth, and not merely the appearance of truth, in the coordination of our contexts? If the psychological impact is the important feature, then the mere appearance is often as effective as truth itself. Though MacFarlane has offered an account of relative truth, it is one incapable of having any rational influence on disagreements. In short, he has given us an outward form of truth, but denied its epistemic power.

²⁴⁶ MacFarlane (2007), p. 30.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

Expressivism and relativism are uneasy bedfellows, since the expressivist would explicitly deny that MacFarlane's assessment sensitive expressions have a truth value in the first place, relative or otherwise. So, there may be powerful reasons against MacFarlane's attempt to reconcile elements of expressivist theory with his relativism, reasons that go beyond what I have attempted to provide in the above discussion. At any rate, I will not press this point against MacFarlane, but will instead consider the possibility of his abandoning his expressivist leanings. Perhaps by doing so, he can save the notion that we can rationally persuade each other regarding the relative truth of assessment sensitive expressions.

At first glance, it is hard to see how MacFarlane can account for the rationally persuasive role of reasons. First, as mentioned, it is possible on MacFarlane's account that both parties to a dispute may hold beliefs that are true relative to their own standards of taste. For either party to successfully persuade the other to change his mind requires that he believe what is false relative to his current standards. So, the challenge then becomes to argue against each other's standards themselves. However, the rationality of such a move is compromised at this level by the fact that MacFarlane explicitly denies any privileging of standards. Yum and Yuk may differ in their beliefs about whether something is tasty, but their argument cannot rationally be carried to the level of their standards themselves. I will revisit these worries in what follows.

But apart from these familiar problems, we can see more clearly MacFarlane's trouble with rational persuasion by returning to the relationship between truth and standards of taste. Suppose that Yum and Yuk continue to try to convince each other to change their standards of taste, taken to be their likes and dislikes. In order for Yuk to

convince Yum of the truth of Yuk's belief that licorice is disgusting, he would have to somehow convince Yum to abandon his current standard of taste. For as long as Yum keeps his current standard of taste, it will be false for Yum that licorice is disgusting. Recall that on MacFarlane's account, Yum's liking of licorice is equivalent to it being true relative to Yum's standards that licorice is tasty. Yuk is trying to get Yum to assess the tastiness of licorice in the same way that he does. This will require Yuk to convince Yum to start disliking licorice, or perhaps that he (Yum) already dislikes licorice. If Yuk can persuade Yum to dislike licorice, then it will follow that licorice is not tasty relative to Yum's newly adopted standards.

But how can Yuk *rationally* persuade Yum that he dislikes licorice, thereby bringing about a change in Yum's context of assessment? As long as Yum has first-hand experience with licorice and likes its flavor, then according to MacFarlane, it will be true for him that licorice is tasty. And as we have seen, it is not clear given MacFarlane's account how someone can be wrong about the truth of whether something is tasty, provided he likes its flavor. So, the success of Yuk's attempt to rationally persuade Yum of the truth of his belief that licorice is not tasty seems to depend on the extent to which Yum's taste preferences can be influenced by reasons. Perhaps reasons can play a persuasive role in the following sort of way.

Suppose that Fredrik has just returned from Norway with a bag of Norwegian candy. On the outside, the candy tastes like black licorice, while the center is filled with a liquid that tastes like warm salt water. I find this candy to be disgusting, and attempt to persuade Fredrik to think so as well. In the way of reason-giving, I tell him, "This candy tastes like warm sea water! How can you think that such a flavor is pleasant?" Fredrik

responds by saying, “I agree with you that it tastes like warm sea water. However, I still think that it is delicious.” Or, rather than thinking that the candy is delicious *in spite* of the fact that it tastes like sea water, Fredrik may think that it is delicious *because* it has this flavor. That is, the reason that I take to support my belief that his candy is disgusting may be precisely the reason he thinks it is delicious.

The point is that in this case, my reasons have failed to persuade Fredrik of the falsity of his belief, since he persists in his liking of the candy. This conclusion supports my claim that MacFarlane has difficulty in accounting for the rationally persuasive force of reasons. Fredrik and I may both have true beliefs, and acknowledge each other’s reasons without those reasons having any rational influence on our current beliefs.

But suppose that instead of persisting in his belief that his candy is delicious, Fredrik is convinced by my comparison with sea water to change his mind. Perhaps he reasons as follows: “Micah is right. This candy does taste like sea water. I find sea water disgusting. Therefore, contrary to my earlier belief, I find this candy disgusting.” We might think of this as a case in which, by taking a step backwards and finding common ground, I have convinced Fredrik that he was mistaken in thinking that he enjoyed the flavor of the candy. This case seems to show that my reasons have exerted rational influence over Fredrik’s tastes. If we think that this is the case, then the next question is whether MacFarlane can explain the apparent rationality of Fredrik’s change of belief.

There are some worries in trying to account for this on MacFarlane’s view. We commonly think that an agent who has responded to the sorts of reasons that tell in favor of a proposition’s truth has superior epistemic standing as a result. It is generally taken

for granted that there is something epistemically better about forming one's beliefs in accordance with these sorts of reasons than not doing so. Initially, it may seem that MacFarlane can account for this. After all, we can say that Fredrik, in being sensitive to reasons that indicated he did not actually like the taste of his candy, was sensitive to reasons that supported the truth of the proposition that his candy was disgusting.

However, I think that this offers only a superficial gloss on rationality. At a deeper level, MacFarlane's account seems unable to offer a satisfactory explanation of the apparent rationality of Fredrik's belief-revision, since he explicitly denies that standards of taste themselves can be privileged or improved. It is unclear how Fredrik's sensitivity to reasons has improved his epistemic standing, since his initial standard relative to which it was true that his candy was delicious is in no way better or worse than his subsequent standard relative to which this claim is false. Fredrik has moved from one truth to another without any way to decide which truth is preferable. Given these conditions, it is very unclear how MacFarlane can account for the superior epistemic standing that we ascribe to agents who are reason-responsive.

So, it is not at all clear that MacFarlane's truth-value relativism is in a better position to handle disagreement and argumentation than indexical contextualism. What sense there is in arguing over the truth in matters of taste seems just as obscure for the relativist as it does for the contextualist.

Finally, I want to briefly discuss a matter about which MacFarlane has been strangely silent. As we have seen, the issues that MacFarlane discusses are very similar to those of interest to Kölbel. Both theorists are interested in reconciling a distinctly semantic version of relativism with disagreement, and both reject contextualism because

it loses the sense of disagreement. However, Kölbel, unlike MacFarlane, is interested in securing *faultless* disagreement. As we have seen, Kölbel starts with the intuition that some disagreement concerns matters over which disagreement does not imply that anyone believes something false. From there, he motivates his relativism. MacFarlane, on the other hand, motivates his relativism not by considering the phenomenon of faultless disagreement, but by assigning a role to contexts of assessment. As a result, they arrive at their relativism in different ways. For his part, MacFarlane is suspicious of the talk of faultless disagreement and seems to consider it largely irrelevant. As he says,

If one does not want to be misunderstood, it is best to avoid the phrase “faultless disagreement” entirely. It is not needed for motivating or explaining truth relativism.²⁴⁸

However, MacFarlane acknowledges that his relativism predicts certain senses of faultless disagreement.²⁴⁹ It is not necessary that we undertake the tedious task of examining each of the several kinds of faultless disagreement that follows from MacFarlane’s relativism. Rather, we take a shortcut through these issues by returning to the problems we have encountered for MacFarlane’s treatment of disagreement. If (as I have argued) disagreement is undermined where both persons’ beliefs may be accurate, then faultless disagreement will be impossible as well.

VII. Conclusion

Though MacFarlane’s formulation of relativism is in many respects more technical than Kölbel’s, his view suffers from many of the same fundamental problems. The most pressing problem for both MacFarlane and Kölbel arises from the fact that they are offering us a relativistic treatment of *truth*. Once we accept the joint claims that the

²⁴⁸ MacFarlane (2014), p. 136.

²⁴⁹ For discussion, see MacFarlane (2014), pp. 133-137.

truth of some class of propositions varies relative to standards, and that each of us should evaluate the truth of these propositions relative to our own standards, we can no longer block the possibility that different individuals will correctly assess their truth differently. However, this possibility of mutual correctness or accuracy in evaluating the truth of beliefs makes genuine disagreement impossible.

Chapter 5 - The Norms of Assertion

I. Background

So far we have examined the trouble that relativism encounters in explaining genuine disagreement. We have seen that the relativist faces a problem similar to the contextualist, due to the fact that the parties to a dispute can recognize that neither of them need be guilty of holding any false belief. The possibility of this recognition of mutual correctness undermines the possibility of genuine disagreement. There is a natural connection between disagreement and assertion, since disagreements are usually a response to what someone else has asserted or would be willing to assert if they have not explicitly done so. One important function of disagreement (I do not claim the only, or even the most important one) is to help us find the truth of some matter. To this end, we engage in the social practice of making assertions and responding to those made by others. But the exchange of assertions is regulated by norms or rules, much as our monetary exchanges are governed by rules. In this chapter, I want to examine several influential accounts of the norms of assertion. My discussion here will largely serve to set the stage for the issues encountered in the next chapter, where I will examine how effectively a normative account of assertion can be reconciled with the relative truth of what is asserted.

Before we begin our examination of the different norms of assertion, it is important to have some idea of what it means to make an assertion. I take assertions to be speech acts in which the speaker presents or represents the asserted contents as true. This description falls short of a systematic analysis, but it does manage to capture the feature of central interest for my purposes. Although I am primarily interested in

assertions taken to be the spoken content of declarative sentences, nothing I will say denies that assertions can also be made in non-verbal forms of communication such as sign language. By taking assertions to be speech acts that represent their contents as true, I intend to leave conceptual space for the liar to make assertions. If assertion requires something stronger such as *aiming* for the truth, then the possibility of the liar making assertions is ruled out by definition. However, rather than say that the liar fails to make assertions in the first place, we should rather say that he makes assertions, but in a way that any plausible norm of assertion should evaluate as impermissible. He has represented the asserted content as true, but with the deliberate intention of misleading his listeners. As Williamson notes, the liar is a cheater whose assertions deserve criticism precisely for the reason that they violate the rules.²⁵⁰

We must distinguish an assertion from its governing norm(s). Granted that assertions are speech acts that represent their contents as true, norms of assertion are rules that govern the performance of these acts. Games provide a useful analogy. Consider the difference between the act of kicking a ball, and that of scoring a goal in soccer. Outside of the context of the governing rules of the game, kicking a soccer ball has no normative constraints. However, in order for the independently defined act of kicking the ball to count as scoring a goal, the act must not be in violation of the rules of the game. Unlike kicking the ball, scoring a goal has significance only within the context of the game. Similarly, the act of asserting can be defined independently of its normative constraints. But in order for an assertion to be proper or permissible, it must obey the rules.

Although the liar can make assertions, his is not an especially interesting case, since everyone can agree that his behavior is in violation of *some* norm of assertion. I am

²⁵⁰ See Williamson (2000).

interested in special cases of what I will call honest or *sincere assertions*. In the case of sincere assertions, not only does the speaker present the asserted contents as true, he also aims or intends to assert what is true. Since the liar is a paradigm example of what we think of as an insincere or dishonest speaker, his assertions lack this feature. With the special case of sincere assertions in mind, the challenge is then to settle on a rule that governs their performance. Relative to the goal of asserting what is true, which rule should a speaker follow?

II. The Truth Rule

I will begin my discussion of the norms of assertion with the truth rule as advocated by Matthew Weiner. According to Weiner, we should assert only what is true²⁵¹:

(Truth Rule) If S ought to assert p, then it is true that p.

Much of Weiner's defense of the truth rule relies on his critique of Williamson's knowledge rule, which we will examine in the following section. But in brief, Weiner's central claim is that contrary to Williamson, assertion in the absence of knowledge may be proper or permissible. Where assertion without knowledge is impermissible, this can be explained by the truth rule and other norms of conversation.

Weiner discusses several examples that he believes show the permissibility of assertions in the absence of knowledge. I will discuss one of these. Imagine two naval commanders discussing the movements of French ships off the coast. Captain Jack Aubrey, who has had long experience of combat with the French, asserts to Lieutenant Pullings that

²⁵¹ See Weiner (2005).

1) The French will wait until nightfall to attack.

Weiner constructs the case to be such that Aubrey has good reasons to think that 1) is true, though his justification is not sufficient for knowledge. Contrary to the knowledge rule's conclusion that Aubrey's assertion is improper, Weiner argues that provided Aubrey's assertion is true, it is proper even though he does not know what he asserts. In the event that the French fail to attack at nightfall, Weiner says that Aubrey's assertion is in violation of the truth rule. But in this case he thinks that Aubrey's assertion does indeed seem improper.

Cases such as 1) highlight one primary defect that Weiner finds with the knowledge rule. The case of Aubrey illustrates Weiner's point that

The knowledge norm is too stringent because we should sometimes speak whereof we do not know. We are imperfect enough that we will sometimes have some idea concerning the truth of the matter at hand without being able to guarantee its truth. Sometimes, when speed is more important than guaranteed accuracy, it will be better to risk a falsehood in order to communicate economically what is most likely true.²⁵²

Before I offer some criticisms of the truth rule, I want to mention the points concerning which Weiner and I agree. As will be seen more clearly in my discussion of Williamson, I agree with Weiner that the knowledge rule is too stringent a constraint on proper assertion. There do seem to be cases in which assertions may be proper in spite of the fact that the speaker lacks knowledge of their truth. Further, I share Weiner's concern that our assertions be guided by reasons or evidence. For Weiner, what makes an assertion proper is that in addition to being true, we must also have good reason to believe the content of the assertion to be true. I will return to this latter point in what follows.

²⁵² Weiner (2005), p. 244.

The first problem with the truth rule concerns the way in which Weiner has formulated it. As seen, truth on Weiner's view is necessary for proper assertion, meaning that if we ought to assert something, then it is true. To assert what is false is to violate the truth rule, in which case our assertion is impermissible. As Weiner notes, "If [our assertions] turn out to be false, they will indeed have violated the truth norm; but if they turn out to be false, they do seem improper."²⁵³ Given that Weiner wants to connect asserting what is false to violating the truth rule (and thereby doing something impermissible), it seems reasonable to think that he would accept the following argument:

- 2) If S ought to assert that p , then it is true that p (Truth Rule).
- 3) p is false (assumption).
- 4) Therefore, S ought not to assert that p .

The point to notice is that this argument is invalid. The only conclusion that follows from 2) and 3) is

- 5) It is not the case that S ought to assert that p .

which is equivalent to the claim that

- 6) S is permitted not to assert p .

It is 4) rather than the weaker conclusion 6) that Weiner seems to want. He does not merely want it to be the case that we are not obligated to assert that p when p is false. He intends the stronger conclusion that we *ought not* to assert p when p is false, since doing so violates the truth rule, and we ought not to violate this rule. Being permitted not to assert that p is consistent with our also being permitted to assert that p . Such states of affairs are common. All else remaining equal, I am permitted to shut the door, and I am

²⁵³ Weiner (2005), p. 231-232.

permitted not to shut it. Similarly, 6) leaves open the possibility that I am permitted to assert p , and also permitted not to assert p .

The truth rule in the form offered by Weiner is framed in terms of obligation: we *ought* to assert that p only when p is true. Since this fails to give us the right conclusion when p is false, we should reformulate the truth rule in terms of permissibility.²⁵⁴ This now gives us the correct conclusion, as can be seen by the following argument. Notice that 7) is equivalent to 4) in the above argument.

- 2*) If S is permitted to assert that p , then it is true that p (Revised Truth Rule).
- 3) p is false (assumption).
- 7) Therefore, it is not the case that S is permitted (S ought not) to assert that p .²⁵⁵

The above revision to the truth rule allows us to get Weiner's intended conclusion that when p is false, it is improper to assert that p . However, this issue is complicated by the fact that Weiner actually invokes more than one sense of propriety, borrowing DeRose's primary/secondary distinction. In reference to the knowledge rule, DeRose says that

As happens with other rules, a kind of secondary propriety/impropriety will arise with respect to this one. While those who assert appropriately (with respect to this rule) in a primary sense will be those who actually obey it, a speaker who broke this rule in a blameless fashion (one who

²⁵⁴ While Kalantari and Luntley nicely make this point regarding belief in their (2013), to my knowledge this point has not yet been made in reference to assertion.

²⁵⁵ Represented symbolically, the above arguments take the following form:

- 2) $OAp \rightarrow p$ (truth rule)
- 3) $\neg p$ (assumption)
- 4) $O\neg Ap$

4) is the needed conclusion, but as can be seen, the conclusion that validly follows is rather,

- 5) $\neg OAp$

In order to get 4), the truth rule must be adjusted such that

- 2*) $PAP \rightarrow p$ (revised truth rule)
- 3) $\neg p$ (assumption)
- 7) $\neg PAP$

asserted something she didn't know, but reasonably thought she did know) would in some secondary sense be asserting properly, and a speaker who asserted something she thought she did not know, but in fact did know (if this is possible) would be asserting improperly in a secondary sense.²⁵⁶

Relying on this distinction, Weiner says, "if assertion is governed by the truth norm, an assertion is secondarily improper if the speaker does not have reason to believe that it is true."²⁵⁷ He further notes that "...if [our assertions] turn out to be false, they do seem improper...(barring secondary propriety)."²⁵⁸ So, an assertion whose content is false may still possess secondary propriety if the speaker had good reason to think that the content was true. In the above discussion I ignored this nuance of Weiner's view, mentioning the passages in which he seemed to accept the straightforward step from p 's being false to an assertion of p being improper. But we can now see that Weiner accepts that an assertion that p where p is false may still be proper in this secondary sense even though it violates the truth rule.

The reason Weiner relies on this distinction between primary and secondary propriety is presumably that without it, the truth rule appears too strong. Just as there are cases in which an assertion looks proper in spite of the fact that its content is not known, there also appear to be cases in which an assertion looks proper even though its content is false. Consider the following example, familiar from discussions of contextualism. Having just parked my car safely in the garage, I assert, "My car is parked in the garage." However, unbeknownst to me a group of very sly car thieves had, just prior to my assertion, managed to steal my car, thereby making my assertion false. Under these circumstances, it strikes me as highly counterintuitive to think that my assertion was

²⁵⁶ DeRose (2002), p. 180.

²⁵⁷ Weiner (2005), p. 236.

²⁵⁸ Weiner (2005), p. 232.

somehow improper or in violation of a norm. Unfortunately, the truth rule seems to lead to this conclusion, as Weiner's unqualified statements indicate.

Consideration of these sorts of examples puts pressure on the truth rule, since the latter would make blameless assertions of what is false improper. This is presumably why Weiner relies on this distinction. By invoking the primary/secondary propriety distinction, Weiner is able to soften the truth rule and bring cases such as the above more in line with our intuitions. In the case of the car thieves, my assertion, though in violation of the truth rule, is still proper in the secondary sense since I had good reason to believe I was asserting the truth.

However, there are worries that arise from this distinction. Introducing the primary/secondary propriety distinction to cope with cases of blameless violations raises the difficult question of how we are to balance these divergent senses of propriety, a task which Weiner does not undertake. Which is preferable: an assertion having primary propriety but secondary impropriety, or one having primary impropriety but secondary propriety? And assuming an assertion is proper in one sense but not the other, how should we view the *overall* propriety of such an assertion? Perhaps these questions can be answered, though I think there is a more powerful objection raised by Lackey.

According to Lackey, there is simply no room for the notions of primary and secondary propriety:

Either a speaker is behaving appropriately and is not subject to criticism *qua* asserter, in which case she has not violated a norm of assertion, or she is behaving inappropriately and is subject to criticism *qua* asserter, in which case she has violated a norm of assertion.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ Lackey (2007), p. 604.

In short, if the assertion is proper, then the asserter has not violated a rule of assertion; and if the assertion is improper, then the asserter has violated a rule of assertion. Weiner attempts to deny the first conditional by squeezing in the idea of secondary propriety: an assertion may be proper in this sense even though it violates the truth rule. However, Lackey offers several convincing examples from sports, epistemology, and ethics to challenge this notion.²⁶⁰ To borrow one of her examples, suppose that a quarterback accidentally crosses the line of scrimmage before making a forward pass, and that this mistake was caused by the fact that one of his contacts fell out during game play. His behavior is improper, and this is not mitigated by the fact that he thought he was behind the line. We may find his violation of this rule excusable given the circumstances, but it would be misguided to think it proper. Or consider a case from ethics. Regarding a person who does what is morally wrong with the mistaken impression that it was right, the familiar response in ethics is not to distinguish primary from secondary moral rightness, but rather to distinguish rightness from blameworthiness or excusability. The conclusion Lackey draws is that

Applying these considerations to the practice of assertion, it should be clear that the notions of secondary propriety and impropriety are spurious. For if S asserts that *p* in violation of a norm of assertion, then, relative to the goal of proper assertion, S *should not have made the assertion in question*. If S asserts that *p* because S reasonably believes that asserting that *p* satisfies the norm of assertion even though it in fact does not, then S may be blameless or have a good excuse for offering an improper assertion. But this does not make either the assertion or the asserter proper in any reasonable (or secondary) sense.²⁶¹

I find Lackey's critique convincing. But if Weiner cannot appeal to secondary propriety to soften an otherwise implausibly strong rule, then the conclusion that we

²⁶⁰ See her very insightful discussion of these examples in her (2007), pp. 604-608.

²⁶¹ Lackey (2007), p. 606.

should draw is that truth is not necessary for proper assertion. The truth rule is too strong because there are cases in which it would prevent us from making assertions that seem intuitively permissible. Consider again the case of the car thieves. It strikes me as intuitively obvious that my assertion, though false, is nevertheless permissible in light of the available evidence. A rule that requires the content of my assertion to be true pays insufficient attention to the role that my reasons should play in determining the appropriateness of my assertion. Weiner's truth rule places too much weight on the actual state of the world, and inadequate weight on my reasons for thinking the world is some particular way. Once we begin to include reasons in the assessment of whether an assertion was proper, we see that a false assertion may be permissible given sufficiently strong reasons, and that a true assertion may be impermissible given insufficiently strong reasons.

On the other hand, the truth rule is at the same time too weak, since it allows too much to pass for permissible assertion. As can be seen by Weiner's formulation of the truth rule, truth is a necessary condition of proper assertion. Weiner does not think that truth by itself is sufficient, since this would leave us with no evidential support for our assertions. Rather, he thinks that reasons play a necessary role in the propriety of assertions:

For our assertions to be proper, not only must they be true, we must have reason to believe them true. The hearer thus is entitled to conclude that the speaker has some warrant for her assertion.²⁶²

In her discussion of Weiner, Lackey objects to the truth rule on the grounds that truth is not sufficient for proper assertion. If it were, then lucky guesses and mere hunches would satisfy the rule. It is important to note that Weiner does not claim that

²⁶² Weiner (2005), p. 238.

truth alone is sufficient. As seen in the above passage, he explicitly states that reasons or some kind of evidential support is necessary for proper assertion. However, the truth rule itself does not include any notion of evidential support, and so on Weiner's account obedience to the truth rule forms only part of what makes an assertion proper. As a result, Lackey is ultimately right that as far the truth rule *alone* is concerned, lucky guesses may satisfy it. Williamson also makes this point in his critique of the truth rule, noting that since it makes only truth necessary for proper assertion,

The truth account does not explain something that it is committed to explaining: the evidential norms for assertion. It should therefore be rejected.²⁶³

And like Lackey, he notes that,

For any reasonable notion of warrant, a true assertion based only on a lucky guess will satisfy the truth rule without satisfying the warrant rule.²⁶⁴

In this section, I have tried to point out some difficulties with the truth rule, though I do not claim that the problems discussed are insurmountable. However, I think the worries raised are substantive enough to justify our looking elsewhere for the proper norm of assertion. In the next section, I will turn to a discussion of Williamson's knowledge rule. As will be seen, though this rule constitutes some improvement on the truth rule, many of the same problems arise here as well.

III. The Knowledge Rule

According to Williamson, only knowledge warrants proper assertion.²⁶⁵ Since he seems to be the most prominent advocate for the knowledge rule, I will focus on his discussion. The first thing to note is that there is a conceptual connection between the

²⁶³ Williamson (1996), p. 501.

²⁶⁴ Williamson (1996), p. 494.

²⁶⁵ See Williamson's (1996) and (2000), Chapter 11.

knowledge rule and the truth rule, since the knowledge rule plus the factivity of knowledge entails the truth rule in the following way:

- 1) If S ought to assert that p , then S knows that p (Knowledge Rule).
- 2) If S knows that p , then p is true (factivity of knowledge).
- 3) Therefore, if S ought to assert that p , then p is true (Truth Rule).

Obedying the truth rule is therefore a necessary but not sufficient condition for obeying the knowledge rule. Given this connection, if the objections raised in the last section against the truth rule stand, then we have reason to be suspicious of the knowledge rule as well. I will revisit this point in what follows, but for the moment I will return to a discussion of Williamson.

Williamson notes that taken as a type of act, assertions can be praised or criticized in light of their truth, informativeness, sincerity, politeness, etc. If any respect in which an act can be praised or criticized is a norm for that act, then assertion has many regulating norms. This much can also be said of an act like jumping, but Williamson thinks that certain norms are more intimately connected to the act of asserting than any norm is to the act of jumping:

One might suppose, for example, that someone who knowingly asserts a falsehood has thereby broken a rule of assertion, much as if he had broken a rule of a game; he has cheated. On this view, the speech act, like a game and unlike the act of jumping, is constituted by rules.²⁶⁶

So asserting, unlike jumping, is conceived of on analogy with games.²⁶⁷ While both jumping and games may be guided by norms, the latter unlike the former are governed by constitutive norms. Constitutive norms, Williamson tells us, are not contingent or arbitrary like conventions. Rather, they are necessary:

²⁶⁶ Williamson (2000), p. 238.

²⁶⁷ The analogy between playing games and making assertions is useful for explaining our intuition that the liar is in some sense a linguistic cheater.

More precisely, a rule will count as constitutive of an act only if it is essential to that act: necessarily, the rule governs every performance of the act.²⁶⁸

So, necessarily, if a rule is constitutive of an act, then it is essential to that act, or governs every performance of the act. There is arguably some unclarity surrounding Williamson's discussion of constitutive rules, with the above passage offering at least two different ways of understanding them. On one reading, to say that a rule is constitutive of the performance of an act means that it is "essential" or necessary to the performance of that act that one follow the rule. Following the rule is part of what it means to perform the act in question. So, if you have performed the act, then you have obeyed the rule. It follows that failure to obey a constitutive rule entails that you have not performed the act. This is different from claiming that one has performed the act, but in an unfair or impermissible way. Games provide the clearest cases. For example, when attempting to perform the complex move of castling in chess, there are a series of conditions that must be met. Successfully performing this move entails that one has obeyed these governing rules, and failure to obey the rules entails that one has not performed the act of castling, since the rules governing castling are essential to the performance of the act. If this is what Williamson has in mind by constitutive rules, then in the case of asserting, the expectation should be that violation of the rule entails that the person has failed to make an assertion, and *not* that his assertion is unwarranted, impermissible, or liable to criticism. However, Williamson maintains just the opposite:

Constitutive rules do not lay down necessary conditions for performing the constituted act. When one breaks a rule of a game, one does not thereby cease to be playing that game. When one breaks a rule of a language, one does not thereby cease to be speaking that language; speaking English

²⁶⁸ Williamson (1996), p. 490.

ungrammatically is speaking English. Likewise, presumably, for a speech act: when one breaks a rule of assertion, one does not thereby fail to make an assertion. One is subject to criticism precisely because one has performed an act for which the rule is constitutive.²⁶⁹

If a rule were constitutive in this former sense, then someone who disobeyed it would not have performed the act in question, and would therefore not be subject to the norms governing that act. Violations would then not merit criticism. However, Williamson wants to connect the question of praise and criticism to whether someone has violated a rule. As he points out, “One is subject to criticism precisely because one has performed an act for which the rule is constitutive.” Given this fact, he does not want to say that breaking a rule governing the performance of some act means that one has ceased to perform that act. It thus seems that Williamson rejects this first interpretation of what it means for a rule to be constitutive.

The second interpretation of a constitutive rule emphasizes Williamson’s claim that it governs *every* performance of the act. A constitutive rule in this second sense is thus one that accompanies all instances of the act in question, rather than one that is a necessary condition of the completion of the act. This now gives the result Williamson wants regarding violations of the rule. One who violates a constitutive rule of a game has not ceased playing the game. Rather, he is still playing the game, but in a way forbidden by the rule(s) and is deserving of criticism for this reason. Williamson wants the same considerations to apply in the case of assertions: someone who makes an assertion in violation of a constitutive rule has not failed to assert, but rather is deserving of criticism precisely because his assertion violated the rule.

²⁶⁹ Williamson (1996), p. 491.

While Williamson seems to favor this latter understanding of constitutive rules, his analogy with games presents some worries. Particularly in the case of games, rules seem to be constitutive in the former, rather than the latter sense. For example, in football there are rules governing the performance of completing a touchdown. If any of these rules are broken, then the act of crossing the goal line with the football fails to count as a touchdown. It is not that a player who violates a constitutive rule in crossing the goal line scores a touchdown, but in a way forbidden by the rule. Rather, the conclusion is that he failed to score a touchdown *at all*. Williamson is right that such a player is still playing the game, but this point is not relevant to the case at hand. Here we are concerned with the significance of this particular act of scoring a touchdown, and not with the wider issue of whether the player is still playing the game. The player may still be playing the game even though his violation of a constitutive rule entails that he did not perform the intended act.

If we maintain Williamson's analogy with games, then in the case of assertions we should expect rules to be constitutive in the former rather than the latter sense. Once again, the question is not whether the speaker who breaks a rule ceases to speak the language. The question is whether the speaker has succeeded in making an assertion, and the violation of a constitutive rule of assertion may mean the speaker has failed to make an assertion even though he has not ceased to speak the language. The performance of an act within a language or game is separate from the issue of whether we are speaking the language or playing the game. I think that although Williamson favors the second interpretation of constitutive rules, his close analogy between games and languages fits better with the first interpretation. As a result, Williamson should either

loosen the analogy between games and linguistic practice, or else keep this close analogy but explain how the second reading still fits. While Williamson's discussion of constitutive rules warrants some clarification, I take it that we have enough of his intended meaning in mind to proceed with his view.

Contrary to the truth rule, which permits assertions based on lucky guess, Williamson points out that

Assertion obviously has some kind of evidential norm. It is somehow better to make an assertion on the basis of adequate evidence than to make it without such a basis.²⁷⁰

Weiner recognized this point as well, but as noted the truth rule itself does not provide any link between true assertions and good reasons. Williamson attempts to correct this state of affairs with the knowledge rule, according to which

(Knowledge Rule) If S ought to assert that p , then S knows that p .

The knowledge rule, according to Williamson, is the sole constitutive rule of assertion, an account that he calls *simple*.²⁷¹ Since knowledge requires justification, Williamson has now provided an evidential link between our assertions and the truth. If we do not know that p , then we ought not to assert that p . As he says, "one must not assert p unless one knows p ."²⁷² However, notice that as in the case of Weiner, the above formulation of the knowledge rule will not give the desired conclusion that we ought not to assert p when we do not know that p . This can be seen with the following argument, in which S lacks knowledge of p because p is false:

- 1) If S ought to assert p , then S knows that p (Knowledge Rule).
- 2) If S knows that p , then p is true (factivity of knowledge).

²⁷⁰ Williamson (2000), p. 245.

²⁷¹ In contrast to complex accounts. See Williamson (2000), p. 241.

²⁷² Williamson (2000), p. 249.

- 3) p is false (assumption).
- 4) It is not the case that S knows that p (from 2 and 3).
- 5) Therefore, it is not the case that S ought to assert p (from 1 and 4).

In order for Williamson to get the conclusion that we ought not to assert p when p is false, we need to change the antecedent of the knowledge rule from what we ought to assert to what we are permitted to assert, as follows:

(Revised Knowledge Rule) If S is permitted to assert p , then S knows that p .²⁷³

But even after we have made this adjustment to the knowledge rule, my worry is that Williamson's view is too strong, and labels what we would otherwise consider to be appropriate assertions as impermissible. Since truth is a necessary condition for permissible assertion under the knowledge rule, if my objections to the truth rule of the last section are plausible, then they also raise worries about the knowledge rule. There I argued that it may be permissible to make an assertion even though the content of the assertion is false, provided that the speaker had good reason to think it was true. If the speaker has done her best to assert what she has good reason to think is true, then she has fulfilled the requirement for proper assertion even if, in spite of her reasons, the content of her assertion turns out to be false. Our responsibility as asserters is not to get things right, but to try to assert what is true on the basis of the best reasons available to us. To require more than this places unreasonable demands on speakers, and raises the worry that we are often in violation of the knowledge rule in spite of our most careful efforts.

The requirement that we know what we assert sets the standards for permissible assertion too high, and I think that we must either soften this rule or else replace it with

²⁷³ Though Williamson explicitly formulates the knowledge rule in terms of what we ought to assert, in his (2000), p. 256 he notes that "The rule make knowledge the condition for *permissible* assertion...[my italics]" However, Williamson does not make this point in response to the issue I have raised here, but rather to contrast permissible assertion with reasonable assertion. I will discuss this latter distinction in what follows.

one that is weaker. I will discuss two approaches to softening the knowledge rule, and then consider two replacements. There are a few ways that the rule can be softened. First, we may invoke the distinction between primary and secondary propriety. An assertion that the speaker did not know, but had reason to think she did know, would have primary impropriety but secondary propriety. This option would allow us to keep the knowledge rule, but soften the conclusion of cases involving blameless violations. However, given what I take to be Lackey's convincing argument against this distinction, I do not think that softening the knowledge rule in this way is plausible.

Williamson offers a different approach. First, he draws a distinction between an assertion's being reasonable and its being permissible, and notes that there are cases in which false beliefs are nevertheless reasonable, given one's evidence. In such cases, it may be reasonable to assert *p*, even though doing so is impermissible because one does not know *p*. He notes that

The rule makes knowledge the condition for permissible assertion, not for reasonable assertion. One may reasonably do something impermissible because one reasonably but falsely believes it to be permissible. In particular, one may reasonably assert *p*, even though one does not know *p*, because it is very probable on one's evidence that one knows *p*. In the same circumstances, one may reasonably but impermissibly believe *p* without knowing *p*.²⁷⁴

The fact that something is reasonable to assert does not entail that it is permissible to assert. For Williamson, knowledge gives the condition on which a speaker has the authority to make an assertion.²⁷⁵ Asserting *p* without knowing *p* is thus to do something that one does not have the authority to do. Just as we may reasonably but mistakenly issue commands that we have no authority to issue, we may reasonably but mistakenly

²⁷⁴ Williamson (2000), p. 256.

²⁷⁵ Williamson (2000), p. 257.

make assertions that we have no authority to make. The fact that we reasonably believe we have the authority does not make our command or assertion permissible. For example, although I may be reasonable in my belief that a bus will not hit me tomorrow, it does not follow that it would be permissible for me to assert this. As Williamson says, asserting that a bus will not hit me tomorrow invites the response “You don’t know that.”²⁷⁶ This distinction between reasonable and permissible assertion has merit. In an ordinary case in which I accidentally run a stop sign because I believed it was not there (perhaps because it was obscured by overgrowth, knocked down, badly faded, etc.), the proper response is to say that while my belief was reasonable, my act of running the stop sign was still impermissible because it violated a rule.

Second, Williamson notes that while the knowledge rule is the sole rule of assertion, it may nevertheless be overridden by other rules not specific to assertion. In the above case, if I ran the stop sign because I was rushing my friend to the hospital, then even though I did something impermissible, the rule itself no longer had precedence in that circumstance. Similarly, Williamson notes that the urgency of a situation may require me to assert “That is your train!” even though I do not know this. In this sort of case, the knowledge rule has been overridden by other more pressing considerations. However, even though my assertion is in violation of the knowledge rule, it may still be appropriate, all things considered.

Finally, Williamson considers the worry that the claim that only knowledge warrants assertion will mean that as speakers, we should constantly be at great pains to make sure that whatever we assert is true. But as ordinary conversations show, we often fall well short of this ideal, playing fast and loose with our assertions. The knowledge

²⁷⁶ Williamson (2000), p. 255.

account therefore appears to entail that our everyday assertions are impermissible more frequently than we may like. While Williamson concedes that violations of the knowledge rule will be frequent (even more frequent than on the truth rule), he points out that their frequency does not mean such violations are always cause for alarm:

Rather, the point is that the knowledge account does not imply that asserting p without knowing p is a terrible crime. We are often quite relaxed about breaches of the rules of a game which we are playing...When assertions come cheap, it is not because the knowledge rule is no longer in force, but because violations of the rule have ceased to matter so much.²⁷⁷

In fairness to Williamson, I think that the above points constitute a reasonable response to worries concerning the knowledge rule. If the knowledge rule still strikes us as too strong, the above discussion shows that Williamson at least is sensitive to this point and tries to soften the implications of his view. However, my primary worry concerns the relationship between violating the knowledge rule, and being deserving of criticism on Williamson's account. His view of this matter in several passages appears to be that speakers who assert what they do not know are subject to criticism *simpliciter*.²⁷⁸ For example, recall his statement that "...when one breaks a rule of assertion, one...is subject to criticism precisely because one has performed an act for which the rule is constitutive."²⁷⁹

So, regardless of whether the assertion was reasonable, whether the knowledge rule was overridden by other norms, or whether infractions of the rule were minor, Williamson thinks that the speaker is still subject to criticism *qua* asserter for asserting what she did not know. But this does not leave any room for blameless violations in

²⁷⁷ Williamson (2000), p. 258-259.

²⁷⁸ Lackey also interprets Williamson as holding this view. See her (2007), p. 594.

²⁷⁹ Williamson (2000), p. 240.

which, although the speaker has violated the rule, she does not deserve criticism for the violation. In spite of our best efforts to assert what we know, the world is often epistemically uncooperative and our assertions prove to be false. On Williamson's account, it appears that we are then deserving of criticism. This seems implausibly strong. As Lackey notes,

But surely, it may be argued, there is a clear sense in which speakers who assert reasonably believed falsehoods and Gettierized beliefs are *not* subject to criticism. For the faultiness of the assertions in such cases results from infelicitous circumstances, not from any sort of blameworthy behavior on the part of the asserters.²⁸⁰

Williamson's view appears to be that one who makes an assertion on the basis of good reasons that prove to be misleading is nevertheless deserving of criticism *qua* asserter. It would be in the spirit of Williamson's approach for him to argue that although such a speaker is still deserving of criticism, the criticism like the violation may be mild. But the real question is not how severe the criticism should be, but rather whether such a speaker deserves criticism *at all*. It does not strike me that a speaker in such a circumstance has done *anything* that merits criticism. The best reasons at our disposal often lead us to error, but in what sense are we blameworthy for this state of affairs?

Whether a speaker has violated a norm is purely a question of the relationship between what she said on the one hand, and what the rule permits or forbids on the other. In contrast, the question of whether the speaker is blameworthy and hence deserving of criticism requires consideration of her epistemic situation. Although this is an important distinction that should be preserved, I think that there is a plausible way to connect these separate considerations. Lackey's joint observations that if someone deserves criticism

²⁸⁰ Lackey (2007), p. 597.

qua asserter, then there is good reason to think that he has violated a rule, and that if someone does not deserve criticism *qua* asserter, then there is good reason to think that he has not violated a rule, seem correct.²⁸¹ But if these principles are correct, then they help us to connect the question of blamelessness to the matter of rule violation. If a speaker is blameless *qua* asserter, then he does not deserve criticism. If he does not deserve criticism, then there is good reason to think that he has not violated a rule. Therefore, if a speaker is blameless *qua* asserter, then there is good reason to think that he has not violated a rule.

If we find the above considerations persuasive, then we have reason to replace the knowledge rule with one that counts assertions short of knowledge as permissible. One option would be to remove the requirement that our assertions have evidential support or warrant. But this would revive the problem encountered by the truth rule, which allowed hunches and lucky guesses to count as permissible assertions. The other two options are to make either belief or truth unnecessary for permissible assertion. I will discuss Lackey's case for the former option before turning to some considerations in favor of the latter.

Lackey argues that cases of what she labels *selfless assertions* challenge the knowledge rule's requirement that a speaker believe what she has asserted. In these sorts of cases, the only condition that is not met for the speaker to have knowledge is that of belief. Consider one her examples, that of the

²⁸¹ Lackey sometimes seems to frame these claims in terms of material conditionals such that if someone deserves criticism *qua* asserter, then he has violated a rule, and if someone does not deserve criticism *qua* asserter, then he has not violated a rule. Strictly speaking, the latter conditional is false since a speaker may be blameless, and hence undeserving of criticism even though he has violated a rule. This is why I have followed Lackey's more carefully formulated claim that there is good reason, rather than an entailment relation. For example, see her (2007), p. 604.

Racist Juror: Martin has spent his entire life in a small, racist community. As a result of the beliefs of his parents and friends, he has absorbed much of the racism of his environment. However, after enrolling in a local community college and learning more about the causes and effects of racist beliefs, Martin is called to serve on the trial of a black man accused of raping a white woman. Upon listening to the weak testimony of the man's guilt and strong testimony in favor of his innocence, Martin recognizes that the evidence does not support a guilty verdict. However, for reasons that Martin increasingly suspects are due to his lingering racism, he cannot bring himself to believe that the man is innocent. Nevertheless, he recognizes that in light of his inability to believe that the man is innocent, he has a responsibility to present the case this way to others. Encountering his childhood friend who inquires about the man's guilt, Martin asserts, "He did not rape her."²⁸²

Lackey comments that not only does Martin seem undeserving of criticism, he actually seems praiseworthy in spite of the fact that he did not believe, and hence did not know the truth of what he asserted. After all, he was able to put aside his racist beliefs and to assert what was both true and well-justified in defense of an innocent person.²⁸³ But if Martin does not deserve criticism, we have reason to think he has not violated a rule. On Williamson's account, since Martin has violated the knowledge rule by asserting what he does not know, he is subject to criticism *qua* asserter. According to Lackey, this implication of the knowledge rule in the case of Martin shows the rule to be defective.

Although Lackey's critique of the knowledge rule focuses on the belief condition, I think that the underlying intuition on which she relies can also be used to motivate the claim that truth is unnecessary. Specifically, in a case such as that of the car thief, I want to push the intuition that a speaker who asserts "My car is in the garage" is blameless, and hence not deserving of criticism in spite of the fact that what he has asserted is false.

²⁸² Lackey (2007), p. 598.

²⁸³ If it be objected that Martin is morally praiseworthy, rather than praiseworthy *qua* asserter, Lackey's other examples of selfless assertion seem to avoid this response.

If this is correct, then given Lackey's principles, we have good reason to think that the speaker has not violated any rule. Since our speaker would have violated a rule on Williamson's account, this gives us reason to reject the knowledge rule. To put this another way, which seems more plausible: to think that our speaker violated a rule, and is therefore deserving of criticism, or to think that he is not subject to any criticism, and therefore probably did not violate any rule? It strikes me as more reasonable to accept the latter, rather than the former claim. These considerations do not conclusively show that the knowledge rule is false, and Williamson can perhaps salvage his account with some adjustments. However, I think that the foregoing discussion raises some worries about the plausibility of the knowledge rule, and at the very least, they offer reasonable grounds for favoring a different approach. I will offer a tentative sketch of such an alternative after turning to an examination of Brandom's view of assertion.

IV. Brandom and the social practice approach

Robert Brandom has presented an influential account of assertion that departs in many ways from the views we have already examined. While Williamson, Weiner, and Lackey have all offered views that focus on the norms governing proper assertion, Brandom is more concerned with the question of what it means to assert in the first place. As he says, "What is it that we are *doing* when we assert, claim, or declare something?"²⁸⁴ His answer is that assertion is a socially instituted speech act that is regulated by commitment and authority.²⁸⁵ Like other social activities, assertions are only appropriate when one has the socially conferred authority to make them.²⁸⁶ Without the proper training and certifications, I do not have the authority to perform medical

²⁸⁴ Brandom (1983), p. 637.

²⁸⁵ Brandom (1983), p. 640.

²⁸⁶ As we have already seen, Williamson makes a similar point in his (2000), p. 257.

procedures. The case is similar for asserting, but here a puzzle arises. According to Brandom, in making an assertion an individual inferentially licenses subsequent assertions. But if asserting does not require prior authority for the original assertion, then how can it inferentially transmit authority to other assertions? On the other hand, if asserting does require prior authority for the original assertion, what gives rise to this authority? Assuming that the authority to assert does not arise *ex nihilo*, what is its source?

Brandom's solution is that it is commitment that gives one the authority to make an assertion. In asserting that *p*, one commits oneself to defending the claim in the face of challenges, and it is this commitment that is constitutive of assertion.²⁸⁷ This explains why Brandom thinks that a parrot is not capable of asserting anything. Even though it can say "it is getting warmer" whenever the weather rises above 80 degrees, it can never commit itself to defending the claim against challenges because it is incapable of distinguishing a reason in the claim's favor from one that would undermine it.²⁸⁸

Assertion is therefore a speech act in which an individual presents a propositional content as true. In doing so, the speaker offers the assertion as a reason for other assertions and incurs the responsibility of justifying the assertion in the event that it is challenged. When an assertion is challenged, the speaker may respond to this challenge in either of two ways. First, he may justify the claim by offering reasons for it. According to Brandom, the justification of an assertion proceeds by offering more assertions, some of which take the form of premises, and some of conclusions. For interlocutors to accept the proffered defense as convincing means that they endorse the

²⁸⁷ Brandom (1983), p. 641.

²⁸⁸ Brandom also thinks that the ability to assert can be correctly ascribed to the mentally ill, children, and foreigners only to the extent that they understand the structure of reasons. See his (1983), p. 644.

inference.²⁸⁹ The second way of answering a challenge consists in appealing to the authority of the original asserter. Others are entitled to reassert a sentence so long as the original asserter has undertaken the responsibility of defending it against appropriate challenges. Should C challenge B's assertion of *p*, the responsibility to vindicate *p* is therefore deferred to A, the original asserter. In the event that A refuses to respond to C's challenge, no one (including B) will be entitled to assert *p* henceforth. Communication involves not only the sharing of commitments, but also the sharing of entitlements.²⁹⁰

I mentioned that according to Brandom an asserter gains the authority to assert a claim by assuming responsibility of defending the claim against *appropriate* challenges. Not just any challenge will be appropriate, but on Brandom's account, whether a challenge is appropriate seems largely a matter of social conventions rather than epistemic considerations. Brandom mentions cases of "bare assertions" in which an asserter is entitled to assert a claim without incurring the responsibility of justifying it because a challenge would be inappropriate given certain special socially conferred authority and privileges. For example, in making a pronouncement *ex cathedra*, the Pope does not incur the responsibility of defending what he has asserted, given his special authority.²⁹¹ In the case of bare assertions, Brandom says that "this failure to shoulder the usual justificatory burden [does not] impugn the status of their utterances as assertions."²⁹² But bare assertions present a special case. In general, the commitment to defend what one has asserted is constitutive of having made an assertion in the first place.

²⁸⁹ Brandom (1994), p. 174.

²⁹⁰ Brandom (1994), p. 175.

²⁹¹ Brandom (1983), p. 643.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

The main problem I find with Brandom's account of assertion is its excessive relativism. According to Brandom, the question of whether an assertion, a defense, or even a challenge is appropriate is determined by the social conventions in place.²⁹³ What makes the performance of some utterance an assertion, and further what makes such an assertion appropriate is determined by how the linguistic community responds to it. For Brandom, the question of whether an assertion is justified or appropriate, like the question of *tabu* in a totemistic society, depends on the conventions of that society:

Whether or not one claim justifies another, for example, is not determined by some objective semantic content or relations the sentences have and which the community must try to live up to or reflect in their social practices of recognizing some claims as justifying others. Rather, a justification is whatever the community treats as one—whatever its members will let assertors get away with... There is no difference for these kinds of things between *being* a K (a breaking of a *tabu*, a play run offsidés, an unjustified asserting) and being treated as such by the community.²⁹⁴

It is clear by this and other passages that the kind of normativity that Brandom has in mind is either not epistemic normativity, or else if it is epistemic it is too weak to be useful in its role of governing assertoric speech acts. His heavy emphasis on the analogy between linguistic practice and games suggests the merely conventional nature of the norms governing assertions. But this approach radically departs from the theories we have already examined. The normativity defended by Williamson, Weiner, and Lackey, by connecting assertion to knowledge, truth, and reasonable belief (respectively) is clearly of the epistemic variety. On the other hand, if Brandom's aim is to offer an

²⁹³ Such a claim stands in stark contrast to the account offered by a theorist like Williamson, who quite explicitly rejects the idea that the constitutive norms of assertions are matters of convention, and are therefore contingent. See his (1996), p. 490.

²⁹⁴ Brandom (1983), p. 644-45.

account of the epistemic normativity governing assertions, it is profoundly weak. The problem with Brandom's approach does not simply concern the question of assertion.

As Brandom himself points out, one of the primary functions of asserting is to construct a web of reasons that connects assertions to each other in inferential relations. Within this web, some assertions (premises) support others (conclusions). Given the epistemic role that assertions play on Brandom's account, his relativism affects such epistemic notions such as justification and truth. The question of interest for Brandom is not what justification is, but rather what the relevant community takes it to be. But these questions are connected, since to *be* a good reason is nothing above and beyond to be *taken* as such by a linguistic community:

In keeping with the social practice approach, instead of explaining what knowledge *is*, the present account explains what it is to *take* a claim as justified, as true, and as the expression of a belief or commitment.²⁹⁵

Brandom's view of epistemic normativity treats whether something is a good reason entirely as a matter of convention, analogous to the question of whether something counts as good manners. Since there are no objective community-independent criteria against which the judgments of communities themselves can be evaluated, the fundamental distinction between something's being a good reason and merely being believed to be such evaporates. If the question of whether an assertion is appropriate or justified is, like the question of whether an individual has violated a cultural *tabu*, entirely dependent upon contingent social conventions, then it is only natural to think that different cultures will evaluate the propriety of assertions differently.

Such a relativistic view takes the short road to self-undermining. Brandom must accept that his own view of assertion is itself offered in the form of assertions forming an

²⁹⁵ Brandom (1983), p. 647.

argumentative structure. If his claim that to be a good reason is simply to be treated as such by the relevant linguistic community is to be taken seriously, then whether his own view is justified must vary from one community to another.²⁹⁶ In light of the inherent relativism of Brandom's position, it is little wonder that relativists such as Kölbel and MacFarlane have explicitly relied on his view in formulating their own accounts of the norms of assertion. I will discuss their views in the following chapter.

V. Some tentative thoughts on a positive approach

I have examined three dominant views on the norms of assertion, and given what I hope are convincing reasons to think that so far none are satisfactory. The truth rule is suspect both because it licenses lucky guesses, and because it prevents well-justified but false assertions from being permissible. The knowledge rule is too strong, either because belief is unnecessary (if we accept Lackey's cases of selfless assertion), or because as with the truth rule, truth is unnecessary. Finally, I argued against Brandom's view of assertion on the grounds that it is unacceptably relativistic.

I think that the suggestion of a positive approach comes by recognizing one central concern shared by Weiner, Williamson, Lackey, and Brandom. Although these theorists hold significantly different views regarding the norms of assertion, each recognizes the importance of connecting our assertions to reasons. Weiner wanted to make good reasons part of what makes an assertion proper, but was ultimately unable to capture this condition. Williamson explicitly included an evidential support relation into his normative account, but added too much besides. Brandom requires us to have good

²⁹⁶ I have already discussed the nature of the self-undermining objection in Chapter 1, and I will not belabor the point here. However, see Siegel (1999) and (2007b) for discussion of epistemic relativism in reference to cultures.

reasons for our challenges and responses, but unfortunately he dilutes the notion of a good reason to whatever is socially accepted as such.

As is no doubt evident, Lackey's position comes closest to the sort of view that I find most reasonable. Her central insight is that what matters most for proper assertion is that our assertions be based at least in part on reasonable belief. According to what she calls the

(Reasonable to Believe Norm of Assertion) One should assert that p only if (i) it is reasonable for one to believe that p , and (ii) if one asserted that p , one would assert that p at least in part because it is reasonable for one to believe that p .²⁹⁷

As can be seen by her examples of selfless assertion, she does not think that belief is necessary for proper assertion. It is only necessary that what the speaker asserts is reasonable to believe (even if he does not do so), and that his assertion be in part based on those reasons. Although I think that Lackey makes a good case for selfless assertions, I am undecided as to whether belief is necessary. But it is not necessary that I settle this issue in order to proceed with my own view, since I think that at the very least we have good reason to believe that truth is unnecessary for permissible assertion. What is of central importance is our reasons, and not whether the contents of our assertions are true.

To connect these admittedly loose thoughts to my earlier comments about sincere assertions, the point to emphasize is that if our intention in making an assertion is to speak the truth, then relative to that aim the proper norm must be one that requires us to have good reasons in support of our assertions. A speaker who asserts that p while failing to have good reason for p has violated the rule, and as a result his assertion is impermissible. Further, he may be subject to criticism for violating the rule, although

²⁹⁷ See Lackey (2007), p. 608.

here we must be careful to leave room for blameless violations in which a speaker mistakenly thought that he had good reasons.

This rough sketch leaves many questions unanswered. For example, I have not said what constitutes a good reason, or specified the precise relationship between violations of the rule and blamelessness. But in my defense, these are large questions that have significance outside of the context of assertion, and I lack the space to address them here. My intention is far more modest. If the criticisms I have raised against Weiner, Williamson, and Brandom have merit, then my claim is merely that they point us in the direction of the need for good reasons, rather than toward truth, knowledge, or mere social acceptability.

VI. Conclusion

In the preceding sections, I have considered various positions on the norms of assertion. While I have attempted to offer considerations that favor some over others, the arguments of this chapter are ultimately intended to serve as a transition into the next chapter, where I will discuss several attempts by relativists to connect their relativism to rules of assertion. Their attempts to do so often result in hybrid views that combine elements of the different rules discussed here. The arguments of this chapter serve both to introduce these elements, and to offer some challenges to them that arise independently of the question of their connection to relativism.

Chapter 6 - Relativism and the Norms of Assertion

I. Background

In Chapter 5, I examined several of the most prominent rules of assertion. In this chapter I will examine to what extent the work of Hales, Kölbel, and MacFarlane can be reconciled with suitably relativized versions of these norms. As will be seen over the course of this chapter, one of my main conclusions is that relativized norms of assertion run into conflict with the persuasive role that assertions play in epistemic disagreement. It is thus worth noting that much of what I say here is an extension of my critique of relativist's treatment of disagreement. In broadly Brandomian terms, I focus on the persuasive role that assertions play in the socially sanctioned game of giving and asking for reasons. Though I have rejected the relativistic implications of Brandom's view,²⁹⁸ I nevertheless think that he is right to focus on the persuasive role of our assertions in disagreement and argumentation, and it is on these points that I think relativism founders.

Before I begin my examination of these issues, I want to take a minute to motivate the worry faced by the relativist. The challenge for the relativist is to explain how the norms of assertion can be harmonized with the relative truth of what is asserted. On this matter, many theorists have expressed doubts. It is often thought that the act of asserting requires absolute truth, and if this is correct, then the relativist's attempts to reconcile relative truth with assertion are doomed from the start. But why should we think that assertion requires absolute truth? Burnyeat, in addressing Protagoras' relativism, claims that

No amount of maneuvering with his relativizing qualifiers will extricate Protagoras from the commitment to truth absolute which is bound up with the very act of assertion. To assert is to assert that *p*...and if *p*, indeed if

²⁹⁸ See Chapter 5, Section IV.

and only if p , then p is true (period). This principle, which relativism attempts to circumvent, must be acknowledged by any speaker.²⁹⁹

According to Burnyeat, to assert is to assert what is true, where the truth in question is absolute. In what follows, my aim will not be to argue directly for the view that assertion requires absolute truth. Rather, I will be more directly concerned with the problems in connecting assertion to relative truth. However, since relative truth and absolute truth exhaust the possibilities, arguments against one are naturally taken to support the other. So, although I will not attempt to argue directly for a view like Burnyeat's, my approach will reveal a difference of emphasis, rather than a difference of opinion. By showing the difficulties that are caused by the relativist's approach, I hope to show that the sort of view of assertion expressed by Burnyeat is essentially correct.

II. Hales

Unlike Kölbel and MacFarlane, Hales has far less to say about the relationship between relativism and assertion. Since he has not explicitly defended any particular view on the norms of assertion, I will consider a few options available to him and comment on their plausibility. But first, I will discuss his reply to Percival in one of the few places in which Hales considers the normative connection between assertion and disagreement.

Imagine a case of apparent disagreement over p between speakers A and B, where p is true for A and false for B. Percival argues that we face a difficulty in trying to reconcile genuine disagreement with the thought that both A's assertion of p and B's contradictory assertion of not- p can be "successful," where a successful assertion for

²⁹⁹ Burnyeat (1976b), p. 195. See also Evans (1985). Strictly speaking, Evans is considering a set of problems with assertion that arises from tense logic. However, his central insight has also been taken as an objection to relativism. For discussion, see Greenough (2011), Kölbel (2004), and MacFarlane (2003).

Percival appears to be one that is true.³⁰⁰ His wider point, however, also seems relevant to the question of an assertion's being known or justified, as I will argue. According to Percival, since A and B appear to disagree, each speaker has reason to insist that the other withdraw his assertion. However, since p is true for A and false for B, both of their assertions are successful relative to the languages they employ.³⁰¹ Percival then asks the following question:

But how can I believe both that the aims given A, for him, by the language he employs were successfully pursued, and that I have every right to force him to withdraw his utterance?³⁰²

I take Percival's point to be that it is unclear how we are to reconcile the thought that two speakers disagree over p (where p is relatively true) with the claim that both have obeyed the norm to assert what is true. If we extend Percival's point somewhat by taking successful assertions to be those that are permitted by the correct norm of assertion, then his question concerns how either speaker can reasonably insist that the other withdraw his assertion while simultaneously recognizing that the assertion was proper relative to its governing norm. It is a common feature of disagreement that in pressing each other to withdraw their assertions, the speakers try to show that the other's assertion violates some norm. That is, our demand for a retraction is naturally thought of as grounded in the notion that the other speaker's act of asserting stands in violation of the rules. If this connection between our demands for a retraction and rule-violation is plausible (as I think it is), then we can put pressure on the relativist's ability to account for disagreement in the absence of rule-violation.

³⁰⁰ Percival (1994), p. 208. Percival thus seems to favor a version of the truth rule for assertion.

³⁰¹ Percival speaks of truth relative to a language, but as we will see, his point can be extended to frameworks or perspectives.

³⁰² Percival (1994), p. 209.

Notice here that it makes no difference whether the governing norm requires us to assert what is true, what we know, or what we have good reasons to believe. In the last chapter, I discussed these norms and offered some considerations for and against each that arise independently of the issue of relativism. But regardless of which of these rules is ultimately preferable, it is important to ask how the fact that both speakers have obeyed the rule can be reconciled with the intuition that they are disagreeing.

In his response to Percival, Hales simply denies that a speaker can simultaneously believe that his interlocutor has asserted successfully, and that he nevertheless can reasonably insist that his interlocutor withdraw his assertion. According to Hales,

Percival's problem only arises if one presupposes an absolutist conception of truth. His mistake is in thinking that under relativism, B is really obliged to insist that A change his mind about *p*. If *p* is merely relatively true, then A's assertion of *p* can, given his perspective, be a successful speech act, and B's assertion of not-*p* can, given her perspective, also be a successful speech act. The conflict between A and B is merely illusory; they are in fact debating at cross-purposes. There is genuine disagreement only if both A and B adopt the same perspective with regard to *p*. It is clearly an option of the relativism I present that two people could adopt the same perspective, although this is a possibility Percival oddly fails to recognize.³⁰³

Simply put, the difference between Hales and Percival seems to be the following. Both accept the conditional that if both speakers' assertions are successful, then there is no disagreement. However, Percival argues that since they are disagreeing, it cannot be the case that both assertions are successful, while Hales argues that since both assertions are successful (relative to the speakers' different perspectives), it cannot be the case that

³⁰³ Hales (2006), pp. 117-118.

they are disagreeing. As we have already seen, this amounts to Hales' claim that there is no such thing as interspectival disagreement.³⁰⁴

I think that there are several difficulties with Hales' response to Percival. Hales claims that the problem that Percival has raised for relativism only arises by begging the question against the relativist by assuming an absolutist conception of truth. However, Percival's point does not appear to require an absolutist conception of truth. Rather, his point seems to be that the trouble for assertion and disagreement arises precisely on the assumption that the truth of the asserted content is relative. Relativizing the truth of what is asserted raises the possibility that two speakers are both successful in making contradictory claims, and it is this fact that undermines the sense of disagreement.

Hales tries to preserve the idea that both speakers have asserted successfully by denying that they are disagreeing, but as I have already argued, this option comes at a price. In particular, it raises the question of what the theologian and philosopher are doing when they seem to be disagreeing about the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, etc.³⁰⁵ So, even if Hales is right that Percival only considers disagreement between perspectives, it is not clear how shifting to those within perspectives helps Hales. The more interesting cases (and those that relativism is often seen as a solution to) are those in which speakers disagree across the divide of differing perspectives. To ignore these cases and focus only on disagreements that arise between speakers occupying the same perspective makes relativism a far less interesting theory. At any rate, theorists such as Kölbel and MacFarlane are more ambitious, as we will see shortly. So, I think that Percival is right to focus on disagreements in which the speakers'

³⁰⁴ However, see my discussion in Chapter 2, Section IV, in which I show that Hales is unclear as to whether he believes that interspectival disagreements are illusory, or only irresolvable.

³⁰⁵ Again, see my Chapter 2, Section IV.

assertions are made from different perspectives. And with regard to these cases, his point concerning the troubled relationship between disagreement and successful assertions within a relativistic framework stands.

Thus far, I have considered Percival's objection to relativism within the context of a version of the truth rule of assertion: A successful assertion is one that is true. However, I think that his central insight can be expanded to consideration of other norms of assertion available to the relativist. First, since Hales is a relativist about knowledge as well as truth, he may accept a relativized knowledge rule of the form:

(Relativized Knowledge Rule) If S is permitted to assert that p , then S knows relative to S's perspective that p .³⁰⁶

According to this rule, whether a speaker S is permitted to assert some philosophical proposition p depends on whether S knows p relative to her perspective. Since knowledge entails truth, the relativized knowledge rule entails a relativized truth rule, according to which

(Relativized Truth Rule) If S is permitted to assert that p , then p is true relative to S's perspective.³⁰⁷

Finally, we can consider a relativized version of the rule that we are permitted to assert only what we have good reason to believe. As we have already seen, Hales is committed to epistemic relativism from two directions. First, whether someone has

³⁰⁶ In the last chapter I showed the problems that arose for a rule of assertion when the antecedent is framed in terms of obligation. Keeping that discussion in mind, in this chapter I will formulate the rules under consideration in terms of permissibility. In each case, this will give the correct result when the consequent is false, i.e., that one *ought not* to assert p .

³⁰⁷ This derivation can be shown in the following way:

- 1) If S is permitted to assert that p , then S knows relative to S's perspective that p . (Relativized Knowledge Rule)
- 2) If S knows relative to S's perspective that p , then p is true relative to S's perspective. (Relativized definition of knowledge)
- 3) Therefore, if S is permitted to assert that p , then p is true relative to S's perspective. (Relativized Truth Rule)

knowledge of some philosophical proposition p varies from one perspective to another, since p 's truth varies relative to perspectives. Second, whether someone has knowledge of p varies due to the fact that epistemic justification varies relative to perspectives. In light of this latter point, Hales would have to relativize the reasonable belief rule in something like the following way:

(Relativized Reasonable Belief Rule) If S is permitted to assert that p , then S has good reason relative to S's perspective to believe that p .³⁰⁸

Now that we have laid out suitably relativized versions of each of our norms of assertion, we can return to Percival's objection. Regardless of which rule Hales may advocate, it will be possible for the assertions of both our speakers to be permissible. Since knowledge, truth, and justification all vary with perspectives on Hales' account, both speakers may assert what is true, or justified, or even known relative to their own perspectives. But then according to Percival, the speakers will fail to disagree with each other. I think that this implication of the relativist's treatment of assertion is correct, and I do not think that Hales' response that our speakers are simply talking past each other is satisfactory.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that as mentioned, Hales vacillates between denying that there are such things as interspectival disagreements, and denying that they are resolvable. His response to Percival indicates that he does not think that such disagreements are possible. However, this is unsatisfactory, since it leaves unexplained what we *are* doing in such cases of apparent disagreement. On the other

³⁰⁸ I mean for this rule to be neutral between S believing that p on the basis of good reasons, and having good reason to believe that p (even if she does not). My reason for this ambiguity is that I am agnostic concerning the issue of whether S must actually believe that p in order for her assertion to be permissible. Lackey's cases of selfless assertion put pressure on this requirement, and though I find examples such as the Racist Juror to be plausible, I make no attempt to settle this peripheral issue.

hand, Hales elsewhere claims that disagreements between those occupying different perspectives are possible, though unresolvable. His reason for thinking this stems from the fact that he denies neutral metaperspectival criteria that can be employed in the evaluation of perspectives themselves. As we have seen, this leads Hales to claim that the adoption of one perspective rather than another is ultimately arbitrary.³⁰⁹ But to accept interspectival disagreement while claiming it is unresolvable raises a new set of problems.

First, the fact that the choice of perspectives is ultimately arbitrary on Hales' account means that what we should assert is ultimately arbitrary as well. Relativists generally take it for granted that each speaker occupies only one perspective at a time. This assumption is permissible as an idealization to illustrate a principle, but it is flawed if the relativist means for it to describe the conditions of actual speakers and knowers. If we take the relativist's notion of perspectives or frameworks seriously, then we often find ourselves in the uncomfortable but common position of simultaneously occupying perspectives that yield incompatible verdicts on what is true, known, or justified. In these sorts of situations, we cannot settle the question of what we are permitted to assert unless we can successfully judge between our competing perspectives. And the only way that we can judge between our perspectives is by appealing to perspectivally neutral criteria of correctness. Unfortunately, as we have seen, Hales explicitly denies that perspectives themselves can be evaluated in terms of some neutral standard. Recall his statement that

There is no 'metaperspective' from which we could select among first-order perspectives. In other words, it is fundamentally arbitrary which perspective and attendant network of belief-acquiring methods one uses to gain philosophical beliefs.³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ See Chapter 2, Section IV.

³¹⁰ Hales (2006), p. 128.

So, regardless of which perspective we occupy, the problem is that any choice of perspective is ultimately arbitrary. But if our choice of perspective is arbitrary, then our assertions themselves are arbitrary. The rules of assertion are meant to act as normative constraints on what speakers may assert, but if whether the conditions for proper assertion are met depends on arbitrarily chosen perspectives, then what the rule permits us to assert is subject to arbitrary change.

For example, suppose that relative to my perspective, the proposition that “God exists” is true, known, or justified. Unfortunately, this same proposition is false, unknown, or unjustified relative to some other perspective, and my choice between these two perspectives is fundamentally arbitrary. Depending on which perspective I adopt, the rules will permit or forbid my asserting that “God exists.” However, since the choice of either perspective over the other cannot be justified, it makes no epistemic difference what I assert. In these sorts of situations, how are speakers to decide what to assert, and how can the relativist reconcile the normativity of such rules with the arbitrariness of what is asserted? Part of the idea of a rule is that its prescriptions are not arbitrary, but rather principled. A relativistic thesis such as Hales threatens to undermine the normativity of our rules of assertion. This is a serious difficulty for the relativist who rejects neutral meta-standards that does not seem to have been recognized in the literature.

But relativism compromises the normative status of our assertions in a second way. As we have seen, truth, knowledge, and good reasons are widely thought to be necessary conditions of proper assertion. A related point is that assertions that have met these conditions ought to carry some normative force for a speaker’s audience. While

relativists often point out that truth has normative implications for what we should believe and assert, I do not think that enough attention has been paid to the normative implications that knowledge has for our doxastic states. For example, in an ordinary situation in which someone tells me that he knows that Jeff Bridges starred in *The Big Lebowski*, all else remaining equal, his assertion should exert *some* normative force on my beliefs. And assuming that I am willing to ascribe knowledge of this proposition to him, I now face epistemic pressure to adopt this belief as well. Since knowledge entails truth, if I accept that my interlocutor's assertion of "I know that Jeff Bridges starred in *The Big Lebowski*" is true, then I should also accept that the proposition that "Jeff Bridges starred in *The Big Lebowski*" is true. To accept the former while denying the latter creates a Moorean sentence. For example, imagine that I assert, "You know that Jeff Bridges starred in *The Big Lebowski*, but I don't believe it." It is my ascription of *knowledge*, rather than mere belief that creates this paradox because if my interlocutor knows what he has asserted, then what he has asserted is true.

In the above example, my point is that a speaker's assertion that he knows something gives us a *prima facie* though of course defeasible reason to believe what he has asserted. The trouble for the relativist is that when two speakers occupy different perspectives, assertions that conform to the relativized knowledge rule exert no epistemic pressure on one's listeners. Since the relativist thinks that what we should believe or assert depends on our own perspective, the fact that someone knows relative to his perspective what he has asserted places *no* epistemic pressure on us to accept his assertion. By placing speakers in a state of "normative insularity,"³¹¹ the relativist cannot

³¹¹ Rovane (2011).

account even for this *prima facie* reason to believe what others have asserted (and we have accepted) that they know.

On Hales' account, whether a speaker knows that God exists varies from one perspective to another. As a result, I may recognize that my interlocutor knows relative to his perspective what he has asserted, and that his assertion that "God exists" is therefore proper for him, but nevertheless correctly withhold my belief, since I recognize that he lacks knowledge relative to my own perspective (either because *p* is false, unjustified, or both). Part of what it means to ascribe knowledge to another is to take what they assert/believe as true, and this ascription of knowledge gives us some reason to adopt the speaker's belief. But Hales' epistemic relativism severs this connection between our knowledge ascriptions to others and what we have reason to believe, thereby allowing us to assert Moorean-like sentences such as "You know (relative to your perspective) that God exists, but I don't believe it."

If we accept the popular notion that truth is a minimal constraint on belief, then we see that relativizing the truth rule takes a more direct route to the same problem. A speaker may follow this rule by asserting what is true relative to her perspective, but since her perspective and mine differ concerning the truth of the asserted content, her true assertion has no epistemic force on my beliefs. However, it strikes me as odd that someone's proper assertion of what is true places no pressure on me to adjust my beliefs. Like the relativized knowledge rule, the relativized truth rule leaves us with Moorean-like sentences such as "It is true (relative to your perspective) that God exists, but I don't believe it." I suspect that a similar point may be made against the relativized reasonable

belief rule, but I will leave this as an exercise, since there is a more pressing worry that I will discuss shortly.

The relativist has at the very least weakened both the normative force of our principles of assertion, and the ability of proper assertions to influence the doxastic states of one's listeners. Perhaps we are now in a better place to understand Hales' comments that disagreement between perspectives is impossible. But suppose that in spite of these difficulties, we try to salvage a sense of disagreement. Our disputants continue to disagree with each other in spite of the fact that each has obeyed the governing rule by asserting (relative to his perspective) what he knows, what is true, or what is based on good reasons. One natural reading of what the parties to the dispute are doing is that in continuing to trade assertions back and forth, they are attempting to persuade each other to change their minds either by withdrawing their prior assertion, or by asserting something inconsistent with it. That is, the function of their assertions within the context of the disagreement is persuasive. But in this case, since both speakers have asserted properly, their continuing attempt to persuade each other cannot be reconciled with wider norms of belief and assertion.

For example, if we think that we should avoid asserting what is false, then we should also avoid persuading others to assert what is false. However, once a speaker recognizes that a proposition true in his perspective is false in his interlocutor's perspective, any continued attempt at persuasion stands in violation of this derived norm. Similarly, any attempt to persuade others to assert what they do not know or lack good reasons to believe relative to their perspective would violate these wider norms as well. I

will revisit this point in my discussion of Kölbel and MacFarlane, since unlike Hales they are committed to disagreement.

Finally, I want to consider a cluster of complications that arise for assertion due to the self-referential nature of Hales' view. First, whether or not Hales is permitted to assert his own view depends on which arbitrarily selected perspective he occupies. According to one perspective, his assertion of his relativistic thesis may be true, or known, or based on good reasons, while according to another equally acceptable perspective, his assertion may fail each of these conditions. Whether his assertion of his view is proper is, like every other assertion involving philosophical matters, completely arbitrary. Further, any effort on the part of Hales to persuade someone occupying a different perspective would mean the deliberate attempt to get him to believe something that is (for him) false. This places a serious limitation on Hales' ability to advocate his own view.³¹²

In Chapter 1, I showed how the traditional problem of self-undermining hinges on whether or not the theory is reflexive, and explored how this feature of Hales' relativism raised worries concerning self-undermining. I now want to revisit the issue of self-undermining, and examine how this problem connects to the matter of the norms of assertion, in particular with regard to the reasonable belief norm. Simply put, the question is whether Hales' epistemic relativism runs into conflict with a principle of assertion that requires the speaker to have good reasons to believe what she asserts when the reasonableness of the beliefs is relative to perspectives. Recall that I have formulated the rule in question as

³¹² We can see the way in which a variation of Siegel's charge of impotence can be made by a consideration of the norms of assertion. See Siegel (2011).

(Relativized Reasonable Belief Rule) If S is permitted to assert that *p*, then S has good reason relative to S's perspective to believe that *p*.

A relativistic principle of assertion such as the above requires that the speaker have good reasons to believe what she asserts. However, recall my discussion in Chapter 1 of Siegel's UVNR argument.³¹³ According to this argument, if epistemic goodness is determined solely by the standards internal to various frameworks or perspectives without there being any meta-level sense of goodness that can be employed to evaluate perspectives themselves, then any reason can serve as a good reason. However, if any reason can serve as a good reason, then the very notion of epistemic goodness of reasons is undermined, and nothing can be a good reason. But without good reasons, no position, including relativism, can be justified. I mentioned the fact that this objection can be made against Hales' brand of relativism, with the conclusion that his own position removes his ability to provide justification in its favor.

The next step is to notice how this feature of Hales' position connects to the matter of assertion. By relativizing the reasonableness of beliefs entirely to perspectives, Hales undermines the possibility of any philosophical proposition being reasonably believed. This much is already familiar. But given the fact that the rule under consideration connects good reasons to permissible assertion, without the possibility of reasonable belief the speaker is not permitted to make an assertion. So, should Hales' favor a rule such as the above, the rule would forbid him from asserting any philosophical proposition, including his own relativism.

³¹³ See Siegel (2004) and (2011).

In this section, I have considered a few norms of assertion available to Hales, and some worries surrounding each with regard to his relativism. I make these points tentatively and do not draw any definite conclusions, since Hales has so far had little to say about the matter of assertion. However, I hope to have shown some of the challenges he faces in reconciling his view with the norms of assertion discussed here. From Hales, I will now turn to a consideration of Kölbel, who has explicitly considered the matter of assertion in reference to his relativism. As we will see, many of the above worries arise for Kölbel as well.

III. Kölbel

In Chapter 3, I examined Kölbel's thoughts on the relationship between relativism and disagreement. There we saw that for Kölbel, faultless disagreement is possible as long as both parties to the dispute have obeyed the principle that they should each believe what is true relative to their own perspectives. Recall that according to Kölbel, the primary norm of belief is

(TR) It is a mistake to believe a proposition that is not true in one's own perspective.³¹⁴

Kölbel's thoughts on the norms of assertion are closely connected to his thoughts on the norms of belief. More specifically, he appears to favor something like a truth rule for assertion. As he says,

Any theory of assertion is committed to the view that truth is *in some sense* a norm for assertion. It is relatively uncontroversial to say that the norms of assertion require asserters to assert only true propositions.³¹⁵

We have seen in the last chapter that *contra* Kölbel, the view that the norms of assertion require us to assert only what is true is hardly uncontroversial, but this point can

³¹⁴ Kölbel (2003), p. 70.

³¹⁵ Kölbel (2008a), p. 10.

be ignored in the present discussion. Within the context of disagreement, connecting the norms of belief and assertion is a natural move, since we can think of disagreements along two dimensions. On the one hand, we may speak of two people disagreeing due to the fact that they hold inconsistent beliefs. But we may also take their disagreement to consist in the fact that they have asserted inconsistent propositions. According to Kölbel, our assertions should be a sincere reflection of our beliefs, meaning that we should assert only what we believe.³¹⁶ But since according to (TR) we ought to believe only what is true, we can derive the truth rule according to which we should assert only what is true. Thus, the prescription that we should believe only what is true, coupled with the prescription that our assertions be sincere gives Kölbel the truth rule of assertion.³¹⁷

As we saw in the case of beliefs, the claim that speakers should assert only what is true must be adjusted to handle disagreements over matters whose truth varies with perspectives. Regarding this point, Kölbel notes that

The idea is that individuals are...subject to the norm that they should *believe and assert* only propositions that are true at the actual world and on their own standard of taste, and that being at “fault”...involves violating a norm one is subject to [my italics].³¹⁸

A proper or “correct” assertion on Kölbel’s account is therefore one whose content the speaker believes, and is true relative to the perspective occupied by the speaker. One preliminary worry for Kölbel’s theory of assertion concerns the semantic issue of *what* the speaker has asserted. I have already briefly examined this issue in

³¹⁶ But see Lackey’s cases of “selfless assertions” in her (2007).

³¹⁷ Although Kölbel considers the norms governing belief and assertion to be largely symmetrical, he does note that they “...probably express different kinds of norms: the sort of mistake one makes when believing something not true is quite different from the sort of mistake one makes when asserting something one does not believe.” One reason for this difference is that “We can’t knowingly believe something not true, but we can (and sometimes do) knowingly assert propositions we don’t believe.” See Kölbel (2002), p. 93.

³¹⁸ Kölbel (2009), p. 390.

reference to our beliefs, and will not belabor the point here.³¹⁹ However, as I have noted, I take an assertion to be a speech act in which the speaker presents or represents the content as true. But given Kölbel's relativism, in what sense do we present the contents of our assertions as true? Given Kölbel's semantics, in asserting a sentence such as "Vegemite is tasty" the speaker has asserted precisely the content that the surface grammar suggests, i.e., that *Vegemite is tasty*. However, this statement takes no stand on which sense of truth is operative. Kölbel cannot say that in asserting that *p*, the speaker has presented *p* as true *simpliciter*, for this straightforwardly conflicts with his view that such contents are merely relatively true. But neither should Kölbel say that in asserting that *p* the speaker presents *p* as true relative to his own perspective, for this move would slide back into contextualism and make disagreement impossible. So, as in the case of belief, it is unclear what the content of our assertions is supposed to be on Kölbel's account.³²⁰

However, even if we ignore these semantic worries, we can see that the trouble for the relativist raised by Percival applies to Kölbel as well. We recall that Percival's worry concerned the relativist's ability to salvage an intuitive sense of disagreement once it is granted that both speakers have asserted "successfully," by which he meant that both speakers have asserted the truth. Percival's case against the possibility of disagreement when both assertions are successful parallels my arguments in Chapter 3 that disagreement is impossible when both beliefs are correct. The reason that the worries raised in the case of beliefs can be raised *mutatis mutandis* regarding assertion is that both beliefs and assertions are subject to governing norms. Regardless of whether the

³¹⁹ See Chapter 3, Section V.

³²⁰ See Rosenkranz (2008) for further discussion of this point.

disagreement concerns a difference of belief, or whether it manifests in conflicting assertions, disagreement appears illusory if both parties involved have believed or asserted properly, i.e., in obedience to the relevant norms.

Unlike Hales, who in his reply to Percival simply bites the bullet by denying that our speakers are disagreeing, Kölbel claims that our speakers really are disagreeing even though both of their contradictory assertions are “correct” relative to their different perspectives. As already seen, his account of faultless disagreement requires precisely this state of affairs. The reason that both assertions are correct is that neither speaker has violated “a norm for evaluating their claims *to which they are subject*.”³²¹ According to Kölbel, speakers are subject to the norm that they should assert only what is true relative to their own perspective. So, in an imagined case in which neither speaker has violated this governing norm in asserting contradictory propositions, Kölbel thinks that they may still be seen as engaged in a disagreement. However, the possibility of mutual correctness, whether of beliefs or assertions, undermines the sense of disagreement.

In addition to the trouble that Kölbel’s relativistic account of assertion raises for disagreement, his view faces additional worries in accounting for the persuasive role that assertions play in our communication. The worry is that the prescription to believe/assert only what is true relative to our own perspective is at odds with the argumentative function of assertions whenever our perspectives differ. As seen in the case of Hales, if each speaker ought to assert only what is true relative to his own perspective, then the continuing attempt to persuade one’s interlocutor to adopt the truth of one’s own belief/assertion will mean the attempt to convince him of what is false relative to his own perspective. This raises the difficulty of explaining how both speakers can justify their

³²¹ Kölbel (2009), p. 391.

attempts to persuade each other while simultaneously respecting the fact that others are also bound by the norms to believe/assert only what is true.

In response, Kölbel tries to explain how it can be coherent for each speaker to aim for truth relative to his own perspective. According to Kölbel, it is reasonable to assume that as language users, we usually obey the principles that we should assert/believe only what is true, and further, that it is common knowledge that we do so. He believes that with these assumptions in mind, there are several ways in which assertions can continue to serve their communicative purposes even in a relativistic framework.

First, Kölbel argues that a speaker's assertion of some content can lead her audience through the following reasoning process. Given the tacit assumption that the speaker is obeying the rule to assert only what she believes, the audience can reasonably assume that the speaker does indeed believe what she has asserted. Further, since the speaker is generally reliable, her belief in the asserted content is good reason to think that it is true in her perspective. Finally, assuming that the speaker shares the audience's perspective, the audience has good reason to accept the content of the speaker's assertion as true for them as well.³²²

In these sorts of examples, we may grant Kölbel that his relativism permits us to convince someone within a shared perspective to change his mind and adopt our belief. After all, he might have made a mistake in assessing what is true relative to our shared perspective. The trouble is that Kölbel here assumes that the speaker and her audience occupy the same perspective. However, in making this assumption, Kölbel fails to address the more interesting and problematic cases in which a speaker aims to persuade someone occupying a different perspective. When this happens, the speaker's

³²² Kölbel (2004), p. 309.

trustworthiness will no longer count as evidence for what her audience should believe, since their perspectives now differ. Where perspectives differ, the speaker's assertions will cease to have normative significance for her audience, and her attempt to persuade them, if successful, will mean getting them to violate the norm that they should believe only what is true relative to their own perspective.

Second, Kölbel considers cases reminiscent of Brandom's challenge and response.³²³ Remember that according to Brandom, in making an assertion a speaker commits herself to justifying what she has asserted in the event of a challenge. Failure to discharge this responsibility brings about two consequences: the asserter loses her entitlement to make the assertion, and her listeners lose their entitlement to reassert the original assertion unless or until it is justified.³²⁴ In the spirit of Brandom, Kölbel considers an additional norm of assertion, according to which

(J) Justify an assertion if asked to do so.³²⁵

In accordance with (J), a speaker must produce a justification for what she has asserted when one is requested. According to Kölbel, such a request may arise either because the speaker's interlocutor finds that his trust in her reliability is insufficient or because he would like to examine the sorts of considerations that support her belief in the asserted content. A conversation might then ensue in which the speaker and her interlocutor make explicit the grounds of their beliefs, with the result that one or the other of them may be led to recognize a mistake committed.³²⁶

³²³ For discussion of Brandom, see Kölbel's (2002) and (2011b).

³²⁴ See my discussion of Brandom in Chapter 5, Section IV.

³²⁵ Kölbel (2004), p. 309. I maintain Kölbel's label.

³²⁶ Kölbel (2004), p. 309.

Although Kölbel does not specify whether in this example the parties involved occupy a shared perspective, his point seems better made under this assumption. The trouble with this example is again that Kölbel takes into account only a very limited range of circumstances in which we make assertions. If the speakers occupy different perspectives relative to which the truth-value or justificatory status of the asserted content varies, then the envisioned dialectical process may not uncover any mistakes on the part of either speaker.

As seen, Kölbel focuses on cases in which the parties to a dispute operate within a shared perspective, but a quick look at the multitude of situations in which assertions are made reveals that we often exchange assertions with those occupying perspectives differing from our own. Here we need not go as far as radically different cultures operating with fundamentally incompatible standards of taste or beauty. If we are to take the relativist's talk of perspectives and evaluative standards seriously, then our closest family and friends and those we converse with on a daily basis may occupy differing perspectives. In these sorts of encounters, our objective may not be to examine their justifying reasons with the intention of seeing which of us has made a mistake, since there may no mistake to which we may draw their attention. Rather, our purpose here may be to show them that the standard they are using is flawed, and not simply that they are misusing their standard. A teenager who thinks that the sweetest alcohols are the best may rightly infer that Boone's Farm is a good alcohol. By asserting that Boone's Farm is in fact a very poor alcohol, we do not aim to persuade him of a mistake in his reasoning. Rather, we aim to help him see that the standard by which he judges is flawed.

While Kölbel is right to emphasize the fact that assertions often serve a persuasive function within our linguistic practice, I think this is precisely the point over which his relativism founders. As I mentioned in the last chapter, I reject Brandom's relativistic account whereby justification is whatever some social group has recognized as such. I think that Brandom is right to emphasize the epistemic role that assertions play in the social practice of giving and asking for reasons. However, raising challenges and providing justifications are normative practices with deeper significance than merely aiding in pragmatic endeavors such as communication and the coordination of behavior. In fact, if the goal is practical, then truth is largely irrelevant. As history has repeatedly shown, propaganda will often work as well if not better than sound arguments. We do not merely want an account of assertion that allows us to persuade each other. We want an account that places limitations on the ways in which we can persuade. In particular, our obedience to the rules of assertion should be consistent with others' obedience to those same rules.

I am not arguing that Kölbel's relativism leaves us without guiding principles as to what we can assert. Clearly, his endorsement of particular principles shows otherwise. My worry rather concerns how Kölbel can account for the argumentative role of assertion in a way consistent with wider norms such as (TR). Assertion often serves the function of giving the other an epistemic reason to change his mind about something, or to adopt a new belief altogether. When two people disagree about the truth of something, each makes assertions that the other may challenge. Each speaker must then answer the challenge by providing a justification for the original assertion. The justifications offered

take the form of more assertions, with the result that the dialectical practice of argumentation involves the construction of a web of assertions.

However, if the parties to the dispute occupy perspectives yielding conflicting judgments concerning the truth of the matter in question and each recognizes that neither has asserted/believed something false, then neither can sincerely aim to change the other's mind in a way that is consistent with their commitment to wider norms such as (TR). Once we recognize that the person holding a belief contrary to our own has faultlessly followed this norm, attempting to change his mind to what is true in our perspective would mean desiring that he adopt (what is for him) a false belief. But if believing something false is a mistake, it should surely violate epistemic norms of intellectual honesty and inquiry to knowingly convince someone to make this mistake. It is therefore unclear how Kölbel's relativism can be reconciled with a Brandomian view of assertion that emphasizes the exchange of reasons.

Argumentation proceeds by assertions that are guided by certain epistemic norms. If the purpose of our discussion is to uncover the truth about something rather than to change someone's mind at any cost, then we must obey these norms consistently. Remember that for Kölbel, no standard of taste is privileged. But once the speaker recognizes that by his own lights there is no privileging of perspectives (except with regard to what *he* should believe), how can he sincerely want to change the other's mind? To do so would be to treat his perspective as privileged for deciding what others should believe, an attitude that is contrary to the relativist's own position. So, he cannot aim to change the other's mind or to provide information that the other can rely on as true. But then one of the primary functions of assertion is left entirely unexplained.

If Kölbel seems reluctant to address cases in which speakers face each other across the gulf of differing perspectives, the reasons for this are understandable. However, since his account of faultless disagreement requires that the parties to the dispute occupy different perspectives (since both speakers cannot be faultless relative to the same perspective), he needs to say more about these sorts of cases. The worry is that the conditions that make faultless disagreement possible also make it impossible for speakers to consistently obey the norms of assertion/belief while simultaneously respecting others' commitment to these same norms.

Finally, I want to comment on the relationship between assertion and Kölbel's defenses of more robust versions of relativism. Thus far, I have focused on Kölbel's view of assertion within the context of a limited relativism confined to taste predicates. But in other places Kölbel offers more sweeping formulations of global relativism that raise worries about reflexivity and self-undermining.³²⁷ For example, consider

(GR) For all x and for all F : it is relative to P whether x is F .³²⁸

Kölbel makes it clear in his discussion that (GR) is reflexive, i.e., that (GR) is itself a permissible substitution instance of x in (GR).³²⁹ Since (GR) is reflexive, it will be relative to some perspective P whether (GR) is itself true. Relative to one perspective (GR) will be true, but relative to some other perspective it will be false. Further, since on Kölbel's account there is no privileging of perspectives, a perspective in which (GR) is

³²⁷ In particular, see his (2002), Chapter 7, and (2011a).

³²⁸ Kölbel (2002), p. 119.

³²⁹ If the F in question is truth or justification, then we arrive at something like

(GR*) It is relative to P whether (GR) is true/justified.

true cannot be evaluated as in any way superior to one in which (GR) is false. Kölbel explicitly admits this much:

Given that the global relativist claims that every proposition is true relative to some and not true relative to other values of the parameter, and that none of the values is in any way privileged, questions remain as to how the global relativist could be dialectically successful. For whatever she claims, the opponent will always be able to point out that that claim is false relative to some values of the parameter, and that these values are no worse than those relative to which it is true. This brings us back to the challenge articulated above: the global relativist will have to explain what normative constraints there are on beliefs and claims. For otherwise the point of debate or of communication and thought generally remains obscure.³³⁰

So, how does Kölbel attempt to meet the challenge of explaining the normative constraints governing our assertions? As already discussed, one important function of assertion is to persuade others of the truth, or of what one believes to be the truth regarding some matter. However, how can the global relativist aim to persuade another of the relative truth of (GR) while simultaneously recognizing that this view is false relative to his listener's perspective? As Kölbel himself points out,

The idea is that in asserting (GR), global relativists must have the aim of convincing their audience, but if they take even (GR) itself to be true only relative to something, then how could they reasonably aim to do so?³³¹

Without a way to justify the choice of one perspective over another, it seems that the global relativist cannot justify either his assertion of (GR), or his attempt to persuade anyone occupying a perspective in which (GR) is false.

Kölbel acknowledges that the purpose of asserting (GR) is to convince others of its truth, and thus rejects the attempt on the part of relativists such as Meiland to argue

³³⁰ Kölbel (2011a), p. 29.

³³¹ Kölbel (2002), p. 123.

that in asserting relativism, the relativist only aims to articulate his position rather than persuade others.³³² However, Kölbel thinks that the above objection to (GR)

...presupposes that one can convince others only if one takes what one wants to convince them of to be absolutely true in a sense in which absolute truth is incompatible with (GR). Relativists might either (rather incredibly) deny that they want to convince...or insist that convincing is possible even on the assumption of global relativism.³³³

Kölbel clearly wants to take the latter route. To this end, he offers the sort of view I have already mentioned, in which speakers exchange reasons within a shared perspective. In his imagined example in which Alfred asserts a proposition q that Barbara doubts, Alfred may respond by making the joint assertions that ' r ' and ' r is a reason for q .' Kölbel then says that "If she comes to believe, like Alfred, that r and, moreover, that r is a reason for q , then she has been convinced by the reasons A[lfred] has given in defense of his views."³³⁴

This response is strikingly unsatisfying. The challenge for Kölbel is not to explain how it is possible for one person to convince or persuade another. Rather, his challenge is to explain how it is possible given his relativism for one person to convince the other on the basis of good epistemic reasons. And as we have already seen, since global relativism undermines the goodness of reasons, it therefore makes it impossible for us to justify our assertions on the basis of good reasons. Kölbel's example only explains what it means psychologically for Barbara to be convinced by Alfred's reasons: to be convinced that q , Barbara was convinced that r , and that r is a reason for q . However, his example does not answer the real question of how Alfred's reasons can be *good* reasons, rather than merely convincing for Barbara.

³³² See Meiland (1980).

³³³ Kölbel (2002), pp. 123-124.

³³⁴ Kölbel (2002), p. 126.

If we are interested in the truth, then we ought to value reasons that are good, and not merely convincing or persuasive. Whether or not someone finds a reason convincing may be the result of nothing more than their own idiosyncratic psychology. What we need are the conceptual resources to persuade others with reasons that are epistemically good, rather than psychologically persuasive. But how can the project of persuasion be reconciled with the fundamentally arbitrary nature of what, given global relativism, is asserted? If every claim is true relative to perspectives without the possibility of rationally evaluating perspectives themselves, then the truth of the asserted content, and hence its propriety on Kölbel's account, is as arbitrary as the perspective used to judge.

In this way, the problem of self-undermining connects to the matter of assertion. To assert is to present a claim as true, and in asserting sincerely a speaker aims to assert the truth. In trying to convince others of something, we aim to get them to form a belief in the truth of the asserted proposition, and if we are honest, then we also believe in its truth as well. However, how can we assert sincerely while recognizing the fundamentally arbitrary nature of what we have asserted?³³⁵ The effort to persuade in a sincere and honest way seems highly compromised given the relativist's position.

At the very least, I hope to have shown that Kölbel's view of the governing norms of assertion and the persuasive role of such assertions do not sit well with his relativism, global or local. From Kölbel I will now turn to a consideration of MacFarlane's view of assertion. As will be seen, although MacFarlane's position is more technical than Kölbel's, I think that it struggles with many of the same fundamental problems.

³³⁵ Again, we can see the way in which Siegel's charge of "impotence," by which he means that the relativist lacks the resources to defend his relativism, proceeds by a consideration of assertion. See Siegel (2004) and (2011).

IV. MacFarlane

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, rather than attempt to offer a definition of relative truth, MacFarlane tries instead to explain the role that relative truth plays in a broader theory of language use, in particular a theory of assertion.³³⁶ If MacFarlane can show that the norms of assertion can be plausibly reconciled with the relative truth of what is asserted, then he will have gone some way toward alleviating one of the central worries facing the relativist.

Like Kölbel, MacFarlane favors Brandom's view of assertion, according to which the act of asserting involves a commitment on the part of the speaker. This raises the question of what a speaker is committed to *doing* in honoring this commitment.

MacFarlane notes that

The best answer I have seen to this question is Brandom's...On this account, an assertion is fundamentally a move in the "game of giving and asking for reasons." In making an assertion, one licenses others to rely on its accuracy in their actions and reasoning, and one commits oneself to vindicating its accuracy in the face of appropriate challenges.³³⁷

So, MacFarlane does not attempt to directly define what it means for an expression to be true as used at one context and assessed from another. Rather, he tries to provide an account of assertion that explains what it means to be committed to the doubly relativized truth of assessment-sensitive expressions. The reason that MacFarlane avoids offering a direct analysis of his relative truth predicate is that he shares Davidson's doubts that the truth predicate can be analyzed in more primitive terms. As Davidson has noted,

³³⁶ MacFarlane (2005a), p. 313.

³³⁷ MacFarlane (2007), p. 128.

For the most part, the concepts philosophers single out for attention, like truth...are the most elementary concepts we have, concepts without which (I am inclined to say) we would have no concepts at all. Why then should we expect to be able to reduce these concepts definitionally to other concepts that are simpler, clearer, and more basic? We should accept the fact that what makes these concepts so important must also foreclose on the possibility of finding a foundation for them which reaches deeper into bedrock.³³⁸

However, the fact that we cannot define such basic concepts in simpler terms does not imply that we cannot gain a grasp of them by examining their connections to other concepts. This is the strategy that Davidson favors:

The lesson I take to heart is this: however feeble or faulty our attempts to relate these various basic concepts to each other, these attempts fare better, and teach us more, than our efforts to produce correct and revealing definitions of basic concepts in terms of clearer or even more fundamental concepts.³³⁹

According to MacFarlane, Davidson's discussion shows us that it is not just the relativist who faces the difficulty of providing an explication of the truth predicate. The absolutist faces this problem as well, and though the absolutist may have an easier task, the task is nevertheless the same. MacFarlane applies Davidson's strategy to the concept of relative truth. Rather than attempting to define his doubly relativized truth predicate directly, MacFarlane tries instead to illuminate the concept by connecting it to a normative account of assertion. In order to get a grasp on what it means for an expression to be relatively true, MacFarlane tries to assign a normative role to contexts of assessment in the evaluation of the propriety of assertions. If he can do this successfully, then

...the relativist should be able to say to the absolutist: "If you can make sense of your absolute truth predicate, you should be able to make sense of

³³⁸ See Davidson (1996), p. 264. For a similar discussion, see McGinn's (2000), Chapter 5.

³³⁹ See Davidson (1996), p. 264.

my relative one, too, and see why it deserves to be called a *truth* predicate.”³⁴⁰

So, MacFarlane’s strategy is to start with an account of assertion that is acceptable to the absolutist, and then to illustrate the concept of doubly relativized truth by assigning a normative role to contexts of assessment. He begins with

(Truth Rule) At a context c , assert that p only if p is true at c .

According to MacFarlane, the Truth Rule is a bridge principle that connects truth at a context of use with normative constraints on when a proposition or sentence may be asserted. Assuming that we have a reasonable grasp on the norms governing truth at a context of use, the thought is that we can then relativize the Truth Rule to take into account contexts of assessment as well. MacFarlane considers several possibilities, but ultimately favors

(Reflexive Truth Rule) An agent is permitted to assert that p at context c_I only if p is true as used at c_I and assessed from c_I .³⁴¹

According to the Reflexive Truth Rule, the context a speaker occupies in making an assertion is the one relevant for assessing it for truth. Speakers should then aim to assert what is true relative to the context they occupy in making an assertion. However, this rule does not assign any essential role to contexts of assessment. As MacFarlane points out, the Reflexive Truth Rule

...gives a significance to ‘true at context of use C_U and context of assessment C_A ’ only for the special case where $C_U = C_A$, and not for arbitrary C_U and C_A . As a result, it cannot help us to understand assessment sensitivity.³⁴²

³⁴⁰ MacFarlane (2014), p. 101.

³⁴¹ MacFarlane (2014), p. 103.

³⁴² MacFarlane (2005a), p. 315.

It is only when the context of use differs from the context of assessment that we encounter an interesting and controversial kind of relativism. As long as the context of use and the context of assessment coincide in the way stipulated by the Reflexive Truth Rule, there will be no normative differences between non-indexical contextualism and relativism proper. Although the Reflexive Truth Rule technically includes contexts of assessment, the real work is done by the context of use. The result is that this rule by itself is not sufficient to distinguish the normative consequences of relativism from those of non-indexical contextualism, since both theories predict that a speaker is permitted to assert that licorice is tasty only if he likes licorice. The two theories are normatively equivalent.³⁴³

MacFarlane's conclusion is not that the Reflexive Truth Rule is incorrect, but rather that it is inadequate. The normative differences between non-indexical contextualism and relativism cannot be drawn by a consideration of the norms for *making* assertions. Rather, they must be drawn by considering the norms for *retracting* assertions already made. This leads MacFarlane to

(Retraction Rule) An agent in context c_2 is required to retract an (unretracted) assertion of p made at c_1 if p is not true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 .³⁴⁴

The Retraction Rule commits a speaker to withdrawing his assertion whenever it is not true at both the original context of use and his current context of assessment. Equivalently, if the assertion is false at either the context of use or context of assessment, then a speaker must retract the assertion. According to MacFarlane, the effect of

³⁴³ This is a technical point, and I do not want to get caught in the details, since at this stage I am only interested in offering a succinct summary of MacFarlane's view of assertion. For a fuller discussion of the reasons why the Reflexive Truth Rule fails to predict any normative differences between non-indexical contextualism and relativism, see MacFarlane's (2014), pp. 104-107.

³⁴⁴ MacFarlane (2014), p. 108.

retracting one's prior assertion is to undo or 'take back' what was previously asserted. In retracting an assertion, a speaker is released from the obligation to justify what was asserted against challenges, with the result that the audience is no longer permitted to rely on the speaker's authority.³⁴⁵

We can illustrate this by considering MacFarlane's example.³⁴⁶ Suppose that ten-year-old Joey likes fish sticks. The proposition that fish sticks are tasty is therefore true at the context of use and context of assessment, since in this example $C_U = C_A$. According to the Reflexive Truth Rule, Joey is therefore permitted to assert, "Fish sticks are tasty."³⁴⁷ However, ten years later it is no longer true that Joey likes fish sticks. Suppose that Joey is now assessing his earlier assertion.³⁴⁸ While his assertion was true at the context of use, it is false at his current context of assessment. As a result, not only is Joey not permitted now to assert, "Fish sticks are tasty," he is further required to retract this earlier assertion. MacFarlane explains:

...the proposition that fish sticks are tasty is false as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 , so by the Retraction Rule, Joey is now required to retract his earlier assertion.³⁴⁹

Retraction is required because his original assertion is false relative to his current context of assessment, and so it cannot be true relative to both the context of use and context of assessment. But then the Retraction Rule requires him to withdraw his earlier assertion.

³⁴⁵ See MacFarlane (2011), (2014), p. 108, and Brandom (1983).

³⁴⁶ MacFarlane (2014), p. 109.

³⁴⁷ Notice that MacFarlane's inference from it being true at the context of use and assessment that fish sticks are tasty to Joey's being permitted to assert "Fish sticks are tasty" requires taking the Reflexive Truth Rule as a biconditional, rather than a conditional as originally formulated. This is a fairly minor point, but it does raise the question of which formulation MacFarlane favors.

³⁴⁸ In this example, Joey is the speaker at the context of use, and the assessor at the context of assessment he occupies ten years later. Thus, on MacFarlane's account, insofar as we can evaluate our earlier assertions, we can be both the speaker and the assessor.

³⁴⁹ MacFarlane (2014), p. 109.

This example has some intuitive pull because it seems reasonable to think that a speaker's *current* thoughts, feelings, beliefs, etc., are relevant to the question of whether he should retract an assertion. Accordingly, Joey's current tastes seem to be those that are relevant to the question of whether or not he should retract his earlier assertion. How a speaker used to feel about the tastiness of something seems less important than how he currently feels, and MacFarlane clearly intends for the Retraction Rule to capture this intuition. This explains his repeated claim that it is the assessor's *current* standards that matter for the evaluation of truth:

We could then say that a single occurrence of "This is tasty," used by a particular speaker in relation to a particular food, is true as assessed from the context in which it is used, but false as assessed from a later context (after the speaker's tastes have changed). And that would open up space to say that the assertion conditions of "This is tasty" are keyed to the speaker's tastes at the time the assertion is made, while the retraction conditions of an earlier assertion of "This is tasty" are keyed to the speaker's *current* tastes, even if they have changed since she made the assertion.³⁵⁰

However, if an assertion's falsity at either the context of use or context of assessment is sufficient to require the speaker to retract, then it seems possible to construct examples in which, contrary to our intuitions, the speaker is required to retract an earlier assertion even though it is true relative to his current context of assessment.

Imagine that Joey's original assertion that "Fish sticks are tasty" was false relative to the context of use he occupied in making the assertion. While ten-year-old Joey did not like the taste of fish sticks, he nevertheless mistakenly asserted that they were tasty, perhaps due to the fact that he lacked adequate grasp of key terms such as "fish sticks" or "tasty." Years later, Joey now likes the taste of fish sticks, and so on MacFarlane's account it is true relative to Joey's current standard of taste that fish sticks are tasty.

³⁵⁰ MacFarlane (2014), pp. 22-23.

Joey's earlier assertion is now true relative to his current context of assessment. So, the intuition here seems to be that Joey is not required to retract.

However, things may not be quite so straightforward. MacFarlane notes that

...the Retraction Rule gives a normative role to contexts of assessment. It requires retraction when the proposition asserted is untrue as used at the context of the original assertion and assessed from the context in which the retraction is being considered.³⁵¹

So, the important point is to specify which context is relevant to the question of whether Joey should retract. Relative to the original context in which he made the assertion, not only should Joey not have asserted that fish sticks are tasty; further, having made the assertion, he should have retracted it. MacFarlane's account predicts that with regard to his original context, Joey can say, "My assertion that fish sticks are delicious was false at the time I said it, and so I should not have asserted it. Having asserted it, I should have (then) retracted it."

But what is Joey *now* required to do about his prior assertion once we shift consideration to his current context? Recall that according to the Retraction Rule, if Joey's assertion is not true as used at the original context of use c_1 and as assessed from the context of assessment c_2 (from which the retraction is being considered), then the speaker in c_2 is required to retract the assertion made in c_1 . So, it seems to follow that Joey should retract in c_2 his earlier assertion made in c_1 , even though his earlier assertion is now true.

This strikes me as a counterintuitive conclusion, and not one that MacFarlane would welcome. If we agree with MacFarlane that our current tastes are those that are relevant to the assessment of prior assertions, then it seems odd to require a speaker to

³⁵¹ MacFarlane (2014), p. 109.

retract a currently true claim simply because it was false when they originally asserted it. However, if the context of use and the context of assessment are supposed to jointly shoulder the normative responsibility of when we should assert and retract, then regardless of whether the assertion is false at the original context of use or our current context of assessment, the Retraction Rule requires us to withdraw our assertion.

MacFarlane may try to block this unwelcome conclusion by giving priority to truth at the context of assessment. So, he may respond that Joey in my example is not required to retract his earlier assertion, since what matters is whether his assertion is true at his current context, and not whether it was true at the original context of use. But this response seems problematic. Remember that MacFarlane's intention is to assign a semantic and normative role to both contexts of use *and* contexts of assessment. Both contexts are supposed to play a role in determining whether an assessment-sensitive expression is true, and in whether we are permitted to assert or required to retract a previous assertion of such an expression. This is what MacFarlane means by referring to assessment-sensitive expressions as "doubly relativized," and he tries to assign both contexts a normative role in his Retraction Rule. If priority is given to either the context of use or the context of assessment, then the other context will be reduced to an idle wheel and the sense of doubly relativized truth characteristic of MacFarlane's relativism is lost.

It is not clear whether the sort of example I have presented is ultimately successful against MacFarlane's account of assertion and he may have resources available that can block my conclusion. However, I think that cases like the one I have offered do point to a tension in MacFarlane's account. On the one hand, he wants his

Retraction Rule to assign a normative role to both the context of use and the context of assessment. Only by showing both contexts to be useful can he motivate his doubly relativized account of truth. On the other hand, he seems to want to place special emphasis on an agent's current context of assessment when deciding whether one is required to retract an assertion. But then the role assigned to the original context of use seems neglected.

Thus far I have considered some difficulties that arise for the Retraction Rule when the speaker is also the assessor. Interpersonal cases, in which there is more than one agent each with his own standard of taste, present added difficulties for MacFarlane's view. As seen, a speaker must retract his assertion when it is not true at both the context of use and the context of assessment. But in interpersonal cases, there will be more than one context of assessment relevant to the question of whether the assertion should be retracted. In addition to that of the speaker, there will also be that of the challenger. Let us return to Yum and Yuk's dispute over whether licorice is tasty. Yum asserts that "Licorice is tasty," and Yuk challenges this claim. Granted that Yum must retract his assertion if it is not true relative to both the context of use and the context of assessment, whose standards (Yum's or Yuk's) are relevant here? Clearly, in such cases it is misleading to speak of *the* context of assessment, since there will be more than one with their accompanying standards of taste.

On this point, MacFarlane is explicit that the relevant context of assessment is that of the speaker. He rejects the thought that the relevant context of assessment is the one occupied by the challenger because this would be "...too damaging to the integrity of a single person's body of assertions...a bit like letting a bush be pruned by several

gardeners with radically different conceptions of how it should look.”³⁵² Automatically deferring to the challenger’s context of assessment would require that I withdraw some of my assertions because they are untrue relative to Bob’s standards, and others because they are untrue relative to Marie’s standards. The resulting body of beliefs would be unsystematic and inconsistent, reflecting no one’s view of the matter.

So, when Yuk challenges Yum’s assertion that “Licorice is tasty,” it is Yum’s standard of taste that is relevant to the question of whether he should retract his assertion. But how does the fact that it is the speaker’s standards of taste that are relevant connect to MacFarlane’s view of assertion taken as a social “game of giving and asking for reasons”? Central to MacFarlane’s normative account of assertion is the idea of challenge and response. As speakers, we are permitted to assert only what is true relative to the context we occupy in making the assertion. In order for someone to be entitled to challenge a speaker’s assertion, the challenger must have good reasons for thinking that what the speaker has asserted is false relative to *his*—the challenger’s—context of assessment, taken as the context he occupies in issuing the challenge. On the other hand, the speaker will have successfully responded to the challenger by showing that his original assertion was true relative to *his*—the speaker’s—context of assessment, taken as the context the speaker occupies in giving the response.³⁵³

When Yum asserts that “Licorice is tasty,” Yuk is entitled to challenge this assertion if he has good reasons for thinking that this claim is false relative to his own standards of taste. Similarly, Yum will have successfully responded to Yuk’s challenge by showing that it is true that licorice is tasty relative to his own standards of taste. The

³⁵² MacFarlane (2005a), p. 320.

³⁵³ MacFarlane (2007), pp. 28-29.

only way in which Yuk can be dialectically successful in forcing Yum to retract his assertion is if Yuk can demonstrate that what Yum has asserted is actually false relative to Yum's own standards of taste.

It is not hard to see the way in which MacFarlane's account of assertion puts Yum and Yuk at cross-purposes. So long as Yum persists in liking the taste of licorice, it will be true relative to his standard of taste that licorice is tasty. And so long as Yuk persists in disliking the taste of licorice, it will be false relative to his standard of taste that licorice is tasty. Yum's assertion that "Licorice is tasty" will be proper, since it will be true for him that licorice is tasty. And the same considerations will make Yuk's contradictory assertion proper.

Once Yum and Yuk recognize the fact that both of their assertions are proper in light of the Reflexive Truth Rule, how can they fairly insist that the other withdraw his assertion? As long as Yum likes licorice, Yuk's challenges will do nothing to show that Yum should retract his assertion. The most that Yuk can do is to show that Yum's assertion is false relative to Yuk's standards of taste, but this small achievement will predictably fail to impress Yum. What matters for Yum is whether what he has asserted is true relative to his own context of assessment. And surely Yuk can recognize this fact. In light of the ultimate futility of doing so, why raise a challenge in the first place? MacFarlane notes that

Yuk can only compel Yum to retract his assertion by, so to speak, changing Yum's perspective—bringing it about that Yum occupies a context of assessment that differs in semantically relevant ways from the one he occupied before.³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ MacFarlane (2014), p. 133.

So, in order to force a retraction, Yuk must get Yum to change his mind about the tastiness of licorice. If he can bring it about that Yum dislikes licorice, then it will follow that Yum's assertion will now be false relative to his new context of assessment, in which case he will be required to retract it. However, as we have already seen, it is not clear how either party could rationally convince the other to change his standard of taste.³⁵⁵ Our likes and dislikes do not seem to be particularly sensitive to epistemic reasons, often being the result of psychological or even physiological influences. So, it is far from clear how argumentation is supposed to proceed. We may appeal to pragmatic reasons in trying to convince each other to change our views about what is tasty, but these sorts of reasons are not relevant to the matter of whether the claims in question are *true*.

MacFarlane's view commits us to the relative truth of propositions about whose truth we cannot argue. The practice of argumentation therefore seems just as mysterious given MacFarlane's relativism as it was given the indexical contextualism to which he objected.³⁵⁶ If we are to understand the act of assertion as a move in the "game of giving and asking for reasons," then we need our reasons to have epistemic force. And they lack this feature on MacFarlane's account, since what is true relative to the challenger's context of assessment carries no normative implications for whether the speaker should retract.

MacFarlane's account of assertion also raises the familiar problems with disagreement. Echoing Percival's concern, we may ask how a challenger can consistently believe that the speaker has obeyed the relevant norms of assertion (in this case by asserting what is true relative to the speaker's current context) while

³⁵⁵ See my Chapter 4, Section VI.

³⁵⁶ See his (2014), p. 11.

simultaneously thinking himself entitled to challenge the speaker's assertion. The demand for a retraction of what has previously been asserted is best seen as grounded in the belief that the speaker has violated some governing norm. Once the challenger recognizes that the speaker has asserted in accordance with the norm, he cannot reasonably demand that the speaker retract his assertion.

MacFarlane at one point comes close to admitting that his relativism undermines the sense of genuine disagreement. In a revealing passage, he notes that

This account captures the distinctive phenomenology of disagreement about matters whose truth is relative. The challenger thinks (rightly) that he has absolutely compelling grounds for thinking that the assertion was not accurate. But the original asserter thinks (also rightly, from her point of view) that the challenger's grounds do nothing to call in question the accuracy of the assertion. The asserter's vindication will seem to the challenger not to show that the assertion was accurate, and the challenger will continue to press his claim. (Until the game gets boring.) Thus we have all the normative trappings of real disagreement, but without the possibility of resolution except by a relevant change in one or both parties' contexts of assessment.³⁵⁷

The "normative trappings" of disagreement arise from the fact that although MacFarlane offers conditions for when speakers may assert or should retract, the norms governing assertion point the speaker and challenger in different directions. This strikes me as a tacit acknowledgement that his relativism cannot offer a robust sense of disagreement. Nevertheless, there are a few problems with this passage. First, MacFarlane's relativism cannot secure for the challenger "absolutely compelling grounds" to think that what the speaker has asserted is false. On the contrary, the challenger is justified only in thinking that the speaker's assertion is false *relative to his, i.e., the challenger's, context*. But after recognizing this fact, it is unclear why the challenger would continue to "press his claim." Having recognized that the most he can

³⁵⁷ MacFarlane (2007), p. 29.

show is that the speaker's assertion is false relative to his standards, while the most the speaker can show is that his assertion is true relative to his different standards, the entire process of giving and exchanging reasons appears doomed from the start. As a result, it is far from clear that MacFarlane's account of assertion can be harmonized with a genuine sense of disagreement over matters whose truth is "doubly relativized."

I have tried to raise some difficulties facing MacFarlane's attempt to reconcile a normative account of assertion with his relativism. Recall that MacFarlane does not think it a promising approach to attempt a direct analysis of relative truth. Rather than tackle the difficult issue of the intelligibility of his doubly relativized truth predicate directly, he instead tries to work out the role played by such truth in a normative account of assertion. If my criticisms are sound, then MacFarlane has not succeeded here. As a result, we should return our attention to the intelligibility of his relativism.

V. Conclusion

I conclude that theorists such as Hales, Kölbel, and MacFarlane have not shown that relativism can be plausibly reconciled with a normative account of assertion. Forceful, non-question-begging arguments that do not presuppose an absolutist conception of truth can be raised against relativistic accounts of assertion. Throughout this chapter, I have tried to meet the relativist on his own terms, so far as that can plausibly be done. Percival offers a powerful objection, which I have extended to several recent relativist proposals. Regardless of whether the relativist favors relativized versions of the knowledge rule, the truth rule, or the reasonable belief rule, it is fair to ask how he can simultaneously accept the joint claims that one's opponent has asserted in conformity to the relevant norm, and that one has the right to demand that he retract his assertion. As

I have tried to show, the resulting difficulties return us to familiar problems with disagreement and argumentation. The upshot is that by examining the problems associated with relativistic accounts of assertion, we have reason to think that the absolutist's claim that viable accounts of assertion require absolute truth is essentially correct.

Chapter 7 – Final Thoughts

From ancient Greece through to the present day, relativism has remained a challenging and multifaceted philosophical theory. Over the course of its history, the view has been confused with various other epistemological and semantic theories, with the result that our discussion could not proceed until relativism's central points were clarified. I have argued that relativism is the view that the truth and/or rational justifiability of certain propositions or sets of propositions is relative to frameworks, perspectives, or standards; and further, that it is not possible to rationally evaluate, compare, or privilege standards themselves. The views of each of the philosophers I have discussed are relativists in this sense.

Hales relativizes the truth and rational justification of all philosophical propositions (including his own relativism) to perspectives, conceived of as ways of knowing. Further, he explicitly claims that there is no neutral standard that would allow us to neutrally compare and evaluate perspectives themselves. Since his theory is straightforwardly reflexive, he is confronted with the age-old problem of explaining how he can rationally defend or recommend his theory over epistemic competitors at the meta-level. With regard to Hales' relativism, Plato's *peritrope* argument is entirely successful. But as I have argued, there are additional problems concerning disagreement. Specifically, once Hales acknowledges that both of two disputing parties are right about the truth of the philosophical matter under consideration, there does not seem to be any robust sense in which they can continue to disagree. Hales explicitly admits this much, but does not seem to recognize the degree to which this fact poses problems for his own theory.

Both Kölbel and MacFarlane retreat somewhat from the epistemological and metaphysical questions that concern Hales, and instead develop versions of relativism that more specifically address issues in semantics and the philosophy of language. I have examined in detail their views on the truth of propositions in matters of taste, and have argued that regardless of the degree to which they escape self-undermining worries, they are still faced with problems in accounting for disagreement. Unlike Hales, Kölbel and MacFarlane are interested in providing an account of disagreement that is consistent with their relativistic theses. However, as was the case with Hales' view, once the parties to a dispute recognize that neither has wrongly assessed the truth of the proposition relative to their own perspective or context of assessment, the sense of disagreement is undermined.

Since disagreements—specifically, those that concern the truth of the proposition under consideration—proceed by way of the parties involved exchanging assertions back and forth, the problems that relative truth raises for disagreement are mirrored in assertion. To show this, I first discussed several norms of assertion, and considered some pros and cons of each that arise independently of the question of relativism. I then tied the literature on the norms of assertion to relativism, and examined the plausibility of several relativist proposals. As was the case with disagreement, Hales has had very little to say about the matter of assertion, and so there it was necessary to consider several options. Kölbel and MacFarlane, on the other hand, have explicitly defended particular views on this matter, and have therefore provided a well-defined target. As it turns out, both defend a variation of the truth rule of assertion. However, regardless of the specific norm under consideration, I have argued that as with truth, the recognition that both of

two inconsistent assertions are proper, i.e., in conformity with the governing norm, undermines the sense of disagreement.

Additionally, relativism threatens the persuasive function that we assign to our assertions within the context of rational disagreements. If our attempts at persuasion are successful, then we will have convinced our opponent to change her mind in favor of what is (for her) a false belief. Or else we will have convinced her to change her beliefs by changing her preferences, while denying that the truth of her new belief is in any rationally way superior to her original (true) belief.

In conclusion, relativism cannot account for the phenomenon of epistemic disagreement and the persuasive role that assertions play in such disagreement. The central reason for this failure is that the relativist cannot offer a principled way to decide between perspectives or contexts of assessment in a way that is consistent with his relativism. Merely appealing to our own standards without providing a way to justify that choice leads to a completely arbitrary judgment concerning the truth of the proposition in question. This arbitrariness, which infects both reflexive and non-reflexive accounts of relativism, has far-reaching implications for our beliefs, assertions, and disagreements. To escape this impasse, I have argued that we must return our focus to epistemology, in particular to a discussion of the goodness of reasons. It is good reasons that allow us to escape epistemic arbitrariness. It is good reasons that make disagreements possible. And it is good reasons (rather than knowledge or truth) that ground our normative principles of assertion and belief.

Bibliography

- Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth and Logic*. London: The Camelot Press, 1954.
- Baghramian, Maria. *Relativism*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Bealer, George. "A Priori Knowledge and the Scope of Philosophy." *Philosophical Studies* 81 (1996): 121-142.
- Bennigson, Thomas. "Is Relativism Really Self-Refuting?" *Philosophical Studies* 94 (1999): 211-236.
- Boghossian, Paul. *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- BonJour, Laurence. *In Defense of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Brandom, Robert. "Asserting." *Nous* 17 (1983): 637-650.
- Brandom, Robert. *Making it Explicit*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- Bueno, Otavio. "Relativism and Scepticism." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 16, no. 2 (2008): 247-254.
- Burnyeat, M.F. "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy." *The Philosophical Review* 85, no. 1 (1976a): 44-69.
- Burnyeat, M.F. "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's Theaetetus." *The Philosophical Review* 85, no. 2 (1976b): 172-195.
- Chisholm, Roderick. "The Problem of the Criterion." In *The Foundations of Knowing*, by Roderick Chisholm, 61-75. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982.
- Chudnoff, Elijah. "The Nature of Intuitive Justification." *Philosophical Studies* 153, no. 2 (2011a): 313-333.
- Chudnoff, Elijah. "What Intuitions are Like." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82, no. 3 (2011b): 625-654.
- Davidson, Donald. "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973): 5-20.
- Davidson, Donald. "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth." *The Journal of Philosophy* 93, no. 6 (1996): 263-278.
- DeRose, Keith. "Assertion, Knowledge, and Context." *The Philosophical Review* 111, no. 2 (2002): 167-203.

- de Sa, Dan Lopez. "The Many Relativisms and the Question of Disagreement." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 15, no. 2 (2007): 269-279.
- de Sa, Dan Lopez. "Presuppositions of Commonality: An Indexical Relativist Account of Disagreement." In *Relative Truth*, edited by Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Max Kölbel, 297-310. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Empiricus, Sextus. *Selections from the Major Writings on Scepticism, Man, and God*. Edited by Philip Hallie. Translated by Sanford Etheridge. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985.
- Empiricus, Sextus. *Outlines of Scepticism*. Edited by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes. Translated by Jonathan Barnes. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Evans, Gareth. "Does Tense Logic Rest Upon a Mistake?" In *Collected Papers*, by Gareth Evans, 343-363. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Evnine, Simon. "Learning from One's Mistakes: Epistemic Modesty and the Nature of Belief." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 82 (2001): 157-177.
- Feldman, Richard. "Good Arguments." In *Knowledge and the Social*, edited by Fred Schmitt, 159-188. Rowman and Littlefield, 1994.
- Feyerabend, Paul. *Against Method*. 3rd Edition. New York, NY: Verso, 1993.
- Field, Hartry. "Realism and Relativism." *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 10 (1982): 553-567.
- Francen, Ragnar. "No Deep Disagreement for New Relativists." *Philosophical Studies* 151 (2010): 19-37.
- Gaukroger, Stephen. "The Ten Modes of Aenesidemus and the Myth of Ancient Skepticism." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995): 371-387.
- Gibbard, Allan. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Glanzberg, Michael. "Context, Content, and Relativism." *Philosophical Studies* 136 (2007): 1-29.
- Glanzberg, Michael. "Semantics and Truth Relative to a World." *Synthese* 166 (2009): 281-307.

- Goodman, Nelson. "Sense and Certainty." *The Philosophical Review* 61, no. 2 (1952): 160-167.
- Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1978.
- Greenough, Patrick. "Truth-Relativism, Norm-Relativism, and Assertion." In *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, edited by Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen, 197-231. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Haack, Susan. "Reflections on Relativism: From Momentous Tautology to Seductive Contradiction." In *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays*, by Susan Haack, 149-166. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Hacking, Ian. "Language, Truth, and Reason." In *Historical Ontology*, by Ian Hacking, 159-177. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Hales, Steven. "A Consistent Relativism." *Mind* 106, no. 421 (1997): 33-52.
- Hales, Steven. "The Problem of Intuition." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2000): 135-147.
- Hales, Steven. "Intuition, Revelation, and Relativism." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, no. 3 (2004): 271-295.
- Hales, Steven. *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.
- Hales, Steven. "A Relativist's Rejoinder." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 16, no. 2 (2008): 271-278.
- Hales, Steven. "What to Do about Incommensurable Doxastic Perspectives." *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009a): 209-214.
- Hales, Steven. "Moral Relativism and Evolutionary Psychology." *Synthese* 166 (2009b): 431-447.
- Hales, Steven. "The Faculty of Intuition." *Analytic Philosophy* 53, no. 2 (2012): 180-207.
- Hou, Richard, and Linton Wang. "Relativism and Faultless Disagreement." *Philosophia* 41 (2013): 203-216.
- Iacona, Andrea. "Faultless or Disagreement." In *Relative Truth*, edited by Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Max Kölbel, 287-295. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Jackman, Henry. "Comments on Hales: Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 16, no. 2 (2008): 255-262.

- Kalantari, Seyed Ali, and Michael Luntley. "On the Logic of Aiming at Truth." *Analysis* 73, no. 3 (2013): 419-422.
- Kölbel, Max. "Saving Relativism from its Saviour." *Critica* 31, no. 91 (1999): 91-103.
- Kölbel, Max. *Truth Without Objectivity*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Kölbel, Max. "Faultless Disagreement." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2003): 53-73.
- Kölbel, Max. "Indexical Relativism versus Genuine Relativism." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, no. 3 (2004): 297-313.
- Kölbel, Max. "Introduction: Motivations for Relativism." In *Relative Truth*, edited by Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Max Kölbel, 1-38. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008a.
- Kölbel, Max. "'True' as Ambiguous." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77, no. 2 (2008b): 359-384.
- Kölbel, Max. "The Evidence for Relativism." *Synthese* 166 (2009): 375-395.
- Kölbel, Max. "Global Relativism and Self-Refutation." In *A Companion to Relativism*, edited by Steven Hales, 11-30. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011a.
- Kölbel, Max. "Conversational Score, Assertion, and Testimony." In *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, edited by Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen, 49-77. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011b.
- Kaplan, David. "Demonstratives." In *Themes from Kaplan*, edited by Joseph Almog and John Perry, 481-563. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 3rd edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Lackey, Jennifer. "Norms of Assertion." *Nous* 41, no. 4 (2007): 594-626.
- Laertius, Diogenes. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by R.D. Hicks. London: William Heinemann, 1925.
- Lasersohn, Peter. "Context, Relevant Parts and (Lack of) Disagreement over Taste." *Philosophical Studies* 156 (2011): 433-439.
- Lewis, C.I. "The Given Element in Empirical Knowledge." *The Philosophical Review* 61, no. 2 (1952): 168-175.
- Lewis, David. "Index, Context, and Content." In *Papers in Philosophical Logic*, by David Lewis, 21-44. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

- MacFarlane, John. "Future Contingents and Relative Truth." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 212 (2003): 321-336.
- MacFarlane, John. "Making Sense of Relative Truth." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005a): 321-339.
- MacFarlane, John. "The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions." in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. 1, edited by T.S. Gendler and J. O'Leary-Hawthorne, 779-799. Oxford: Clarendon, 2005b.
- MacFarlane, John. "Relativism and Disagreement." *Philosophical Studies* 132 (2007): 17-31.
- MacFarlane, John. "Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths." In *Relative Truth*, edited by Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Max Kölbel, 81-102. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- MacFarlane, John. "Nonindexical Contextualism." *Synthese* 166 (2009): 231-250.
- MacFarlane, John. "What is Assertion?" In *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, edited by Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen, 79-96. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- MacFarlane, John. *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2014.
- Machuca, Diego. "The Pyrrhonian Argument from Possible Disagreement." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 93 (2011): 148-161.
- McGinn, Colin. *Logical Properties*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Meiland, Jack. "Concepts of Relative Truth." *The Monist* 60 (1977): 568-582.
- Meiland, Jack. "On the Paradox of Cognitive Relativism." *Metaphilosophy* 11 (1980): 115-126.
- Montminy, Martin. "Contextualism, Relativism and Ordinary Speakers' Judgments." *Philosophical Studies* 143 (2009): 341-356.
- Morris, Jeremy. "Pragmatic Reflexivity in Self-defeating and Self-justifying Expressions." *Argumentation* 22 (2008): 205-216.
- Percival, Philip. "Absolute Truth." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 94 (1994): 189-213.
- Plato. "Theaetetus." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, translated by M.J. Levett, rev. Miles Burnyeat, 157-234. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

- Pritchard, Duncan. "Defusing Epistemic Relativism." *Synthese* 166 (2009): 397-412.
- Putnam, Hilary. "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized." In *Realism and Reason*, by Hilary Putnam, 229-247. Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Quine, W.V.O. *Word and Object*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960.
- Rescher, Nicholas. *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997.
- Richard, Mark. "Contextualism and Relativism." *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004): 215-242.
- Rosenkranz, Sven. "Frege, Relativism and Faultless Disagreement." In *Relative Truth*, edited by Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Max Kölbel, 225-237. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Rovane, Carol. "Relativism Requires Alternatives, Not Disagreement or Relative Truth." In *A Companion to Relativism*, edited by Steven Hales, 31-52. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *The Prince of Darkness*. Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- Rysiew, Patrick. "Relativism and Contextualism." In *A Companion to Relativism*, edited by Steven Hales, 286-305. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Sankey, Howard. "Witchcraft, Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion." *Erkenntnis* 72 (2010): 1-16.
- Sankey, Howard. "Epistemic Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 42 (2011): 562-570.
- Sankey, Howard. "Scepticism, Relativism and the Argument from the Criterion." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 43 (2012): 182-190.
- Siegel, Harvey. "Goodmanian Relativism." *The Monist* 67, no. 3 (1984): 359-375.
- Siegel, Harvey. "Relativism, Truth, and Incoherence." *Synthese* 68 (1986): 225-259.
- Siegel, Harvey. *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*. Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company, 1987.
- Siegel, Harvey. "Argument Quality and Cultural Difference." *Argumentation* 13 (1999): 183-201.
- Siegel, Harvey. "Relativism." In *Handbook of Epistemology*, edited by M. Sintonen Niiniluoto and J. Wolenski, 747-780. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004.

- Siegel, Harvey. "Essay Review of Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, Jan. 2007a.
- Siegel, Harvey. "Multiculturalism and Rationality." *Theory and Research in Education* 5, no. 2 (2007b): 203-223.
- Siegel, Harvey. "Epistemological Relativism: Arguments Pro and Con." In *A Companion to Relativism*, edited by Steven Hales, 201-218. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Stojanovic, Isidora. "Talking about Taste: Disagreement, Implicit Arguments, and Relative Truth." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30, no. 6 (2007): 691-706.
- Weiner, Matthew. "Must We Know What We Say?" *The Philosophical Review* 114, no. 2 (2005): 227-251.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. *Language, Thought, and Reality*. Edited by John B. Carroll. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956.
- Williamson, Timothy. "Knowing and Asserting." *The Philosophical Review* 105, no. 4 (1996): 489-523.
- Williamson, Timothy. "Assertion." In *Knowledge and its Limits*, by Timothy Williamson, 238-269. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Winch, Peter. "Understanding a Primitive Society." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1964): 307-324.
- Wright, Crispin. "On Being in a Quandary." *Mind* 110, no. 437 (2001): 45-98.
- Wright, Crispin. "Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism and Rhubarb." In *Truth and Realism*, edited by Patrick Greenough and Michael Lynch, 38-60. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Wright, Crispin. "New Age Relativism and Epistemic Possibility: The Question of Evidence." *Philosophical Issues* 17 (2007): 262-283.
- Wright, Crispin. "Relativism about Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts about the Very Idea." In *Relative Truth*, edited by Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Max Kölbel, 157-185. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008a.
- Wright, Crispin. "Fear of Relativism?" *Philosophical Studies* 141 (2008b): 379-390.
- Wright, Crispin. *Truth and Objectivity*. Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Zimmerman, Aaron. "Against Relativism." *Philosophical Studies* 133 (2007): 313-348.