

Reply to John MacFarlane's "Simplicity made Difficult"

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Predictably, John MacFarlane claims that our discussion does not get to the heart of relativism and that his own framework does. We think he both underestimates the resources at work in our approach and overestimates the clarity and cogency of his. In what follows we shall briefly speak to both of these themes.

We say that relativists reject the idea of truth as a monadic property. MacFarlane disagrees – he doesn't think the typical relativist rejects the idea of monadic truth. MacFarlane's discussion of these issues confuses a monadic *property* with a monadic *predicate*. To see what we have in mind, let's begin with the notion of a monadic property. Our grip on that notion is more or less in line with the tradition. Roughly speaking a monadic property either does or doesn't stand in the instantiation relation to a given object. For many purposes this can be represented as a particular function from worlds to extensions, and in a setting where intensional issues are irrelevant it may serve our purposes well enough to represent it as a set of objects. Abstract objects with a more complex profile are not what we have in mind by 'monadic property'. In particular an abstract object with parameterized instantiation – something that is instantiated by Jones relative to one index on a parameter but not relative to another -- is not what we had in mind by 'monadic property'. In saying this, we are not acting as the terminology police. We are merely alluding to a tradition of thinking and talking about properties that we are immersed in and which is quite familiar. Aware that there might be some flexibility in how authors use 'monadic property', we tried to forestall misinterpretation with remarks such as the following:

One final point of clarification: to get our intentions right, think here of 'instantiates', as it figures in T1 [T1= There are propositions and they instantiate the fundamental monadic properties of truth *simpliciter* and falsity *simpliciter*] as a simple binary relation between an object and a property. Suppose that one held that instantiation is a three-place relation between an object, a property, and a time, and one said that the property of being true was instantiated by a certain proposition at noon but not at 1pm. That would not, on the intended construal, square with T1. (RMT, note 5, p.3)

The standard relativist takes the content of an ordinary sentence to be an object that is true or false relative to parameter values. How about predicates? The standard relativist does not take the content of 'is fun' to be given by a particular function from

worlds to extensions. Rather the content will deliver a function from worlds to extensions only relative to a parameter value. Relatedly, the content – even leaving intensional issues to one side – is not naturally thought of as a set, since then a proposition of the form 'A is fun' would be true or false simpliciter (assuming the standard connection between truth and true of.) Just as a sentence isn't true simpliciter, so a predicate is not true of an object simpliciter. Predicates deliver extensions only relative to parameterizations. Now what goes for the predicate 'is fun' goes for 'is true'. For relativists, the content of 'is true' is not given by a function from worlds to sets of propositions but instead yields such functions only relative to parameter values (standards of taste for example).¹

The upshot is this. The relativist that we presented does indeed allow a syntactically monadic truth predicate that behaves in a disquotational way (roughly, 'S' is true relative to a parameter value iff "S' is true' is true relative to that value). But the standard relativist does not think of 'true' as expressing a monadic property.

That means that the relativist picture is not friendly to T1, the first component of Simplicity:

T1: There are propositions and they instantiate the fundamental monadic properties of truth *simpliciter* and falsity *simpliciter*

Of course, the relativist can pay lip service to that T1 provided she is willing to do sufficient violence to the intended meaning of 'monadic property', but that is neither here nor there.

Given this, we are not willing to buy into MacFarlane's way of setting things up. As he sees it, recognition of a monadic property of truth is common ground between relativist and non-relativist. He sees our main thrust as being to the effect that the two views push different orders of explanation between monadic truth and other notions. We did indeed voice a commitment to the fundamentality of monadic truth (more on that later), but we did not think that a commitment to a property of monadic truth was common ground between the relativist and ourselves. As we see things, the standard relativist does not think of himself as associating a monadic property with the truth predicate.

That said, there is an internal tension within relativism that may emerge. Just as the relativist gives himself a disquotational truth predicate, she will also likely give himself a 'true of' predicate that will license speeches about 'true of' that sound just like the realist ones (on the relevant use, 'F' is true of a' is true relative to an index just in case 'Fa' is true relative to that index.) She can similarly contrive a use of 'instantiates' whose application to her parameterized contents of predicates mimics the realist's application of 'instantiates' to non-parameterized properties (on the relevant use, 'The content of 'F' is instantiated by a' is true relative to an index just in case 'Fa' is true relative to that index). Insofar as the relativist goes along this path systematically enough, he risks depriving himself of any way of denying that ordinary sentences express complete propositions and of denying that ordinary predicates express traditional properties. He will thereby risk losing the ability to set himself apart from his putative opponents. It is only in connection with that instability that we entertained the relativist's appealing to order of explanation issues as a candidate way of setting himself apart from the realist. But we left it as an 'open question' whether

¹ Suppose instead one interpreted 'true' in my mouth as one particular function from worlds to sets of propositions, the function delivered by 'true for me'. That would, inter alia, make a hash of such belief reports as 'Jones thinks that it is true that stamp collecting is fun'.

such an appeal could bear the explanatory burden placed on it and reminded the reader that ‘this way of proceeding risks conceding that there is nothing in pre-reflective ways of talking that points towards relativism rather than realism’ (RMT p.138). MacFarlane’s discussion reinforces our scepticism that appeal to order of explanation issues will enable one to stake out a distinctively relativist position once one has lost the ability to deny that ordinary sentences/predicates express complete propositions/properties. We take that not as evidence that we have misconstrued relativism but rather than we have identified an instability within that position.

A disappointing aspect of MacFarlane's discussion is the extent to which he misrepresents our view of the relationship between contemporary analytic relativism and the proliferation of parameters of evaluation. He attributes to us the view that 'assessment sensitivity is trivially implied by proliferation' (MacFarlane, this vol.). We are quite explicit in our denial of this. We emphasised the point that standard relativists add disquotational truth and the non-relativity of belief and meaning reports to proliferation. And we were fully explicit that the latter moves were not trivially forced on one by the former. (For example, it is *prima facie* perfectly coherent to say that just as 'Fiddle playing is fun' varies in truth relative to standard parameters so 'John believes that fiddle playing is fun' varies in the same way.) Our relativist framework did make room for something like the phenomenon of assessment sensitivity and attempted to account for it by a combination of proliferation, disquotational truth, and non-relativity of belief and meaning reports. Indeed, we think it is very illuminating that the combination of those three elements give rise to something much akin to assessment sensitivity. The pattern of argument that MacFarlane criticizes and attributes to us is, by contrast, not recognizable to us. Further, his remark that we argued that there is no need to discuss assessment sensitivity is seriously misleading – we had a whole section on how something like that phenomenon arises within the framework that we describe (the section is hard to miss: it is called “Assessor Sensitivity” and starts of p.17 of RMT.)

Now perhaps the assessment sensitivity that we discuss is still importantly different from the kind of sensitivity that MacFarlane thinks is crucial. Or perhaps, by certain relativists’ lights, we offer too shallow an explanation of that phenomenon. This is difficult terrain and we are open to constructive engagement along either of these dimensions.

MacFarlane's own preferred strategy is to lean on a rather different ideology to characterize relativism. He says the relativist should take 'the accuracy of some assertions or beliefs to vary with the context from which they assessed' (MacFarlane, this vol.) The philosophical lynchpin here is, thus, the concept of *accuracy*.² Why did we not go along with his preference to characterize the key debates in those terms? We do not think it particularly helpful to frame debates using expressions that have the ring of ordinary concepts but which are in fact being used as terms of theoretical art. Indeed this commits two sins simultaneously – it fails to use the familiar to gain a conceptual anchor while creating an illusion that one is doing so.

Take the concept of accuracy. There is an ordinary predicate 'accurate' that we apply to particular belief episodes and assertions. But that predicate is straightforwardly tied to our one place notion of truth by the rule 'An assertion is

² In previous papers he sets things out in terms of various notions of truth at a context – see MacFarlane’s note 2 (this volume).

accurate iff what is asserted by that assertion is true'.³ The speech 'His assertion is completely accurate but what he is asserting is false' sounds like utter nonsense. One sign that MacFarlane is using a term of art is that we are supposed to be perfectly open to severing the connection between 'accuracy' in his sense and disquotational truth. Moreover, given the connection between ordinary accuracy and disquotational truth, the claim that 'The accuracy of an assertion varies according to the context from which they are assessed' will be just as *prima facie* puzzling as 'The truth of what is asserted by a particular assertion varies according to the context from which it is assessed', uttered using 'true' as a one place disquotational predicate.

When MacFarlane is being careful he does not use the monadic predicate 'accurate', but instead displaces it by the relational predicate 'accurate as assessed by'. This is no more expresses the ordinary notion of accuracy than the relational 'is true as assessed by' expresses the ordinary notion of disquotational truth. The apparent vacillation between the ordinary monadic notion of accuracy and a relational term of art is apt to create confusion all over the place. Consider for example the norm that MacFarlane articulates: 'We should assert or believe something only if in doing so we would believe it accurately'. This is naturally interpreted as utilizing the ordinary one place notion, especially since, so interpreted, the norm is far from implausible. (For example, anyone who thought that knowledge was the norm of assertion would think of this norm as derivatively correct.) Yet MacFarlane then says that the view that 'accuracy is assessment sensitive' has consequences for this norm. It's hard to see how this could be if the technical notion is relational and the notion that figures in the norm is the monadic one. So perhaps the quoted norm did not, despite appearances, use the ordinary notion. It is not easy to tell what is going on.⁴

MacFarlane believes that his own resources provide the means to answer a worry that we raise concerning how the relativist ought to distinguish herself from a naïve, chauvinistic realist – one briefly articulated above. The worry, roughly speaking is that the relativist seems to make speeches that are remarkably similar to the naïve chauvinistic realist: 'Gnocchi isn't tasty. Giovanni thinks it is. So what he thinks is false.' We recognized that the relativist can tack on remarks such as 'Oh, but it is true for Giovanni!'. But the worry is that there are very natural interpretations of additional remarks that the chauvinistic realist can buy into: 'Oh, if your are talking about what meets Giovanni's (false) standards for what is tasty, I'll grant you that by those standards it is tasty'. We did not offer the objection as utterly decisive, but as one that is much more troubling than relativists acknowledge. MacFarlane, somewhat

³ Note that this rule is not violated by a framework which allows that something that was once true is now false. Any attempt to counterexample that principle using that consideration will inevitably ignore issues of tense.

⁴ We should also remind the reader of one further difference in intellectual orientation between ourselves and MacFarlane. He tends to work within a framework where the key semantic notions are applied to sentences and/or assertoric acts. Talk of propositions, properties, and so on tend to be added within his discussions as something of an afterthought. We on the other hand wanted the contents of beliefs and utterances to play a central role and to frame relativist ideology in those terms. This makes for some differences in emphasis. For example, his semantics takes over from Kaplan an emphasis on the distinction between the context of utterance and the circumstances of evaluation. But insofar as our basic ideology is applied to contents, circumstances of utterance will no longer figure as a central moving part.

mysteriously, claims that his ideology of assessment relative accuracy somehow avoids the worry. But it seems that there are extremely natural ways for the chauvinistic realist to pay lip service to that relational ideology of accuracy at a context so as to buy into that as well. Nothing prevents the chauvinist realist from saying: 'Oh, if you are talking about Giovanni's standards, it is accurate as assessed relative to that context'. It is, at best, rather optimistic to suppose that slightly opaque terms of art will put the appropriate distance between the relativist and realist here. Might the difference show up in the patterns of assertion and retraction, or the patterns of normative evaluation of Giovanni's utterances? It is hard to see that there will be any such difference. If the speaker's tastes change in favour of gnocchi, he or she will switch to 'I now think that, after all, gnocchi is tasty' whether or not he is a chauvinistic realist who takes his current reactions as the guide to objective taste or a MacFarlanesque realist. MacFarlane's discussion, thus, does not remove the worry – indeed, reliance on the term of art 'accurate as assessed by' merely serves to reinforce it.

MacFarlane apparently thinks that Chapters two and three in our book are largely irrelevant to contemporary relativism.

Consider first Chapter two, devoted to diagnostics of shared content, including say that, believe that, agreement and disagreement reports and anaphoric uses of 'that'. One of the most cited defences of analytic relativism is Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson's 'Epistemic Modals in Context'. Say-that and believe-that reports had a central place in that paper. More generally we noticed that both relativists and their precursors often rely on assumptions of shared content and we reckoned it useful ground clearing to compare various diagnostics for shared content. Along the way we made distinctions that we thought were both useful and seldom appreciated. Issues of shared content are pertinent to one of the central topics of the book - the time and world relativization of truth in formal semantics. These are often used as a basis for lending respectability to relativism. Dismantling views that *displace* monadic truth in favour of truth relative to worlds and times serves to put relativism in a radically worse light than it is typically thrown. (MacFarlane himself frequently alludes to time and world relativization as his primary strategy for softening readers up to his own views, so he can scarcely suppose such views are irrelevant.) Chapter two is very important in that connection. Our discussion reveals various arguments for time neutral contents (using collective belief reports and using anaphoric 'that' claims) to be pretty bad arguments. Moreover, the best supported diagnostics positively tell against those contents. The materials in Chapter two also figure quite prominently in Chapter four (a chapter that MacFarlane does not even mention). There we argue that while disagreement diagnostics are of evidential value, relativists have been altogether simplistic and one sided in their presentation of the relevant data when it comes to predicates of personal taste.

MacFarlane does briefly respond in a footnote to the line of argument that uses agreement and disagreement data against temporally neutral contents. Sometimes philosophers lapse into a use of 'begging the question' that sheds no lights whatsoever on a debate, teetering on the most pointless use whereby one automatically classifies an argument against a position as question begging when its premises support an unwelcome conclusion. MacFarlane's complaint of question begging seems precisely one of this sort. The agreement and disagreement generalizations are well motivated. The time-neutral content lover has to engage in special pleading with regard to those generalizations when confronted with their application to his view. Special pleading of this kind is quite generally regarded as a cost for a view in syntax, semantics and

science quite generally. If the relevant generalizations are well motivated and natural, an accusation of question begging will not make special pleading any more compelling or reasonable.

Consider next the 'operator argument' the topic of Chapter three. MacFarlane claims that he is 'not aware of any analytic relativists who motivate proliferation on the basis of an operator argument' (MacFarlane, this vol.) concluding that the 'whole issue seems irrelevant to the debate over analytic relativism'. It is hard to reconcile his dismissive tone with the actual content of the relevant literature. Take Kölbel one of the most cited contemporary relativists:

In the relativist semantics for taste predicates, we can introduce a class of operators that are analogous to Kaplan's modal and temporal operators in that they shift the standard of taste parameter in the circumstance of evaluation, just as modal and tense operators shift the world and time parameter respectively. English seems to contain a construction that might intuitively be interpreted in this way, namely the "For S , p "- construction, as in "For Anna, whale meat is tasty." (Kölbel, 2009, P.384)

How can we read this and not think that Kölbel is motivated, at least in part, by Kaplan's operator argument? (Indeed Chapter 3 was the chapter with which Kölbel was most keen to engage when presented with a draft of our book.) Let us next consider MacFarlane himself. It is interesting here to focus on his 2007 paper "Relativism and Disagreement," in which the operator argument plays a central role. MacFarlane's presentation of relativism starts with a quote of Kaplan's abbreviated statements of the operator argument viz:

A circumstance will usually include a possible state or history of the world, a time, and perhaps other features as well. The amount of information we require from a circumstance is linked to the degree of specificity of contents, and thus to the kinds of operators in the language. (Kaplan 1989, p. 502)

If we wish to isolate location and regard it as a feature of possible circumstances we can introduce locational operators: 'Two miles north it is the case that', etc. ...However, to make such operators interesting we must have contents which are locationally neutral. That is, it must be appropriate to ask if what is said would be true in Pakistan. (For example, 'It is raining' seems to be locationally as well as temporally and modally neutral.) (Kaplan p. 504)

Commenting on this passage, MacFarlane says: 'Taking this line of thought a little farther, the relativist might envision contents that are "sense-of-humor neutral" or "standard-of-taste neutral" or "epistemic-state neutral," and circumstances of evaluation that include parameters for a sense of humor, a standard of taste, or an epistemic state.' (2009 p.21-22).⁵ MacFarlane does deny that the *only thing* that could ground such parameterization is the presence of operators of the sort Kaplan described (see e.g. MacFarlane 2009, 245). Now perhaps what he meant to say was 'I

⁵ In other work (MacFarlane 2009) he says about this passage, "These words come from one of the founding documents of the tradition in formal semantics now regarded as orthodox." (p.244). He shows no indication that he objects to the orthodoxy.

not only wish to deny that operator-theoretic considerations of the sort that Kaplan describes are the *only* considerations that can motivate neutral contents. I wish to go further: Operator considerations cannot play any justificatory role at all'. But he didn't say that and he can't expect his audience to be mind readers.

Let us turn finally to the issue of fundamentality and explanatory priority. As we indicated earlier, our claim of fundamentality for monadic truth played a smaller role in our indictment of relativism than MacFarlane thinks. We did want to include something in our discussion by way of indicating a commitment to the idea that the property of truth is not 'gerrymandered' – that it 'carves at the joints' – and of indicating a commitment to the idea that it is more natural/less gerrymandered than relational properties such as *true at* which hold between propositions and worlds or times. That said, we concede that our remarks concerning the fundamentality of truth were pretty underdeveloped. At least part of the reason was that issues about fundamentality and priority are in general particularly tendentious and difficult issues, ones that would take us too far afield to discuss at length. Also, few of our arguments rely on considerations of fundamentality and so an extended discussion was for that reason less than vital.

We do wish to stress one point however. It is rather dangerous to suppose that the priority of one property family over another is established by defining predicates that express the second in terms of predicates that express the first. At least if one employs an intensional notion of definitional adequacy (whereby one succeeds in defining a predicate insofar as one captures its intension), one can define 'green' in terms of 'grue' and 'bleen': but that would show nothing about which holds in virtue of which or which is most fundamental. MacFarlane's own way of connecting explanatory priority to definition is, thus, somewhat alien to our way of thinking.

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