

DRAFT: Please don't circulate

Paul Horwich

### **An Undermining Diagnosis of Relativism about Truth**

A currently prominent idea is that within certain domains -- perhaps those of aesthetic evaluation, or of moral judgment, or of event prediction, or of certain "might" and "ought" claims -- there is no such thing as absolute truth, and truth applies only relative to a point of view.<sup>1</sup> The thought, in other words, is that different people (or communities) occupy different perspectives -- different 'assessment contexts' -- and that, on certain topics, although we can speak of a given assertion (or belief) as being true relative to this perspective but not to relative to that one, there will be nothing in reality to make it simply true or simply false.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The only sort of 'absolute truth' that such domains might sustain would be derivative -- explained as 'truth relative to every point of view'.

<sup>2</sup> Sparked by the work of Max Kölbel, John MacFarlane, Crispin Wright, Andy Egan, Mark Richard, and others, analytic philosophy has seen a recent spurt of interest in truth-relativism. Note, for example, Kölbel's Truth Without Objectivity, London: Routledge, 2002; MacFarlane's "Future Contingents and Relative Truth", The Philosophical Quarterly 53, 2003, 321-336, and his "Relativism and Disagreement", Philosophical Studies 132, 2007, 17-31; Wright's "Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism and Rhubarb" in P. Greenough and M. Lynch, eds., Truth and Realism, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Egan's "Epistemic Modals, Relativism, and Assertion", Philosophical Studies 133, 2007, 1-22; and Richard's When Truth Gives Out, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

In my opinion this form of skepticism about truth is obviously mistaken. For it can hardly be denied that our practice with the word "true" is to treat the claim, "Blah, blah, blah", (whatever it may be) as equivalent to "The proposition that blah, blah, blah is true". Thus any statement that anyone ever makes is taken to amount to a statement to the effect that something is unqualifiedly true -- and not merely true relative to a certain point of view. Moreover, this equivalence rule (hence the deflationary concept of absolute truth that it brings into play) is coherent, simple, useful, harmless, and provides a fully adequate explanation of our overall use of the word "true" -- so why should we be in the slightest bit unhappy with it?<sup>3</sup>

The answer, some will be tempted to say, is that there will sometimes be no objective way of adjudicating disagreements about which claims are true and which false. For the basic justifying assumptions deployed by one person (or community) will sometimes diverge from those deployed by another.

And it's indeed right that conflicts can't always be settled to everyone's satisfaction. But to jump to the conclusion that no truth or falsity exists in such cases -- hence no possibility of 'correctness'

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<sup>3</sup> The concept is deflationary only insofar as it is completely captured by the equivalence rule. The utility of such a deflated concept resides in its nonetheless serving perfectly well as a device of generalization -- viz. "All instances of  $\langle p \rightarrow p \rangle$  are true", "It's desirable to believe only what is true", "Not everything true is verifiable", etc. Its full coherence arguably depends on there being a decent response to the liar paradoxes; but in that respect it's no worse off than any other account of truth (including relative truth). For a couple of alternative deflationist responses see Hartry Field's Saving Truth from Paradox (Oxford University Press, 2008) and my "A Minimalist Critique of Tarski" (Chapter 5 of my Truth-Meaning-Reality, Oxford University Press, 2010).

or 'incorrectness' and no issue of who is 'mistaken' -- would appear to presuppose an inflationary conception of truth (as a substantive and potentially analyzable property). In particular, it appears to presuppose an equation of truth with 'what would (or should) be believed in the limit of inquiry'.

In combination with this sort of epistemic anxiety about absolute truth -- or as an alternative to it perhaps -- it is often complained that one couldn't imagine, in the case of certain domains, how any supposed facts might be explained, or what they would be like. They would allegedly be intolerably weird. ("Surely the natural world could contain no such property as objective deliciousness!")

But again it would seem that a gratuitous inflationary requirement has been imposed, this time metaphysical: roughly, that all genuine properties -- hence all genuine facts, hence all genuine truths -- must be locatable within the naturalistic order.<sup>4</sup>

To put the matter abstractly: an implication of many inflationary definitions of "true" (i.e. of "true<sub>I</sub>") -- those that make truth<sub>I</sub> dependant on one or another form of epistemic or metaphysical determination -- will be the existence of propositions, <p>, that are neither absolutely true<sub>I</sub> nor absolutely false<sub>I</sub> (since neither <p> nor <-p> will possess the alleged truth-constituting property). Still, it might well be clear that some

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<sup>4</sup> The virtue of truth-relativism, according to Max Kölbel (op. cit.), is its ability to explain the intuition that certain disagreements (e.g. over matters of taste) are 'faultless' in that that neither of the conflicting beliefs is incorrect or mistaken.

But we might well question whether such intuitions are worthy of explanation. My suggestion is that they derive from misguided inflationary views, and so should not in fact be respected.

qualified or conditional form of this property is possessed either by  $\langle p \rangle$  or by  $\langle -p \rangle$ . Hence, relativistic truth<sub>I</sub>.

In somewhat more detail: it may be that, within certain domains, although the alleged absolute-truth constituting determination-property,  $DET^q$ , is seldom possessed either by  $\langle p \rangle$  or by  $\langle -p \rangle$ , we do more often have, relative to the salient features of a given perspective, either a determination (in that way) that  $p$ , or a determination that not  $p$  -- i.e. either

$$DET^q [T^k (A_j), p]$$

or

$$DET^q [T^k (A_j), -p]$$

where  $A_1, A_2, A_3, \dots$  are alternative perspectives or assessment contexts; where  $T^1, T^2, T^3, \dots$  are various forms of feature whose instances an assessment context might have (for example, its associated facts, or assumptions, or standards, or preferences), and where  $DET^{q1}, DET^{q2}, DET^{q3}, \dots$  are alternative forms of determination (such as entailment, or nomological necessitation, or epistemic obligation, or constitution of belief). And so the inflationist might naturally proceed to speak of  $\langle p \rangle$  being true<sub>I</sub> relative to  $A_1$  but false<sub>I</sub> relative to  $A_2$ , meaning that the specific  $T^k$ -features of perspective  $A_1$ , whatever they happen to be, determine (in manner  $q$ ) that  $p$  whereas the  $T^k$ -features possessed by  $A_2$  instead determine that not  $p$ .<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the form of feature ( $T^1$ , or  $T^2$ , ...) relevant to a given proposition will vary with the kind of proposition it is (e.g. aesthetic, predictive, etc.). And given any such form,  $T^k$ , the specific body of features,  $F^k_j$ , of that form possessed

Suppose, for example, that absolute-truth<sub>I</sub> is equated with Peircian ultimate consensus (i.e. what nearly everyone would come to believe in the limit of inquiry), and consider the question whether rhubarb is delicious. Presumably, there will always be people with very different likes and dislikes; so disagreement on this point will never be extinguished -- in which case the proposition can't have an absolute truth<sub>I</sub>-value. But many complete sets of taste-preferences will either dictate believing that rhubarb is delicious, or dictate believing that it's not. Thus the proposition will be true<sub>I</sub> relative to people with some such perspectives but false<sub>I</sub> relative to other people.

Similarly, if one assumes that a proposition, <p<sub>t+</sub>> (specifying a certain occurrence at time, t+) qualifies as true<sub>I</sub> if and only if <p<sub>t+</sub>> is nomologically necessary, then very few propositions will qualify as absolutely true<sub>I</sub> or absolutely false<sub>I</sub>. So one might well move to the roughly Aristotelean idea that <p<sub>t+</sub>> is true<sub>I</sub> at (i.e. relative to) an earlier time, t-, just in case the events occurring at t- nomologically necessitate that p<sub>t+</sub>. In that case (assuming that some causal laws are probabilistic) the proposition, <Obama will be re-elected in 2012> may well have no truth<sub>I</sub>-value relative to 2010. But events occurring on a certain day in 2012 do of course determine either that he is re-elected, or determine that he isn't. So the

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by any given assessment context will vary from one such perspective to another.

proposition does have a truth<sub>I</sub>-value relative to that time.

Thus, I would suggest that only those philosophers with initial attachments to one or another inflationary conception of 'absolute truth and falsity' will have reason to say that certain propositions 'can be true only relative to a perspective'.<sup>6</sup>

It's worth emphasizing that in rejecting such proposals and embracing absolute truth one is certainly not denying that certain notions other than truth might be exclusively relativistic. Clearly there are concepts whose applications have always been regarded as essentially elliptical. For example, "x is to the left of y" is obviously short for "x is to the left of y relative to point of view k"). And there are other cases (e.g. "x is moving") in which it became rational for us to change our theoretical/conceptual outlook from one in which our beliefs, when fully articulated, were allowed to take the absolute form, "k is f", to one in which they may only take the relative form, "k is f relative to C".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This diagnosis of the temptation to invoke 'relative truth' was mentioned in my Truth, Blackwell, 1990, p.55 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.53).

<sup>7</sup> Notice that the transition to a relative theory of motion involved a modification of the meanings of terms such as "moving", "at rest", etc. These terms came to be no longer treated as logical predicates. Therefore, strictly speaking, the change in what we ought to say should be schematized as being from "k is f" to "k is f\* relative to C", rather than to "k is f relative to C".

As for the truth-values of the 'old' propositions, <k is f> and <k is not f>, that we used to express, our current view -- as relativists who think, e.g., that nothing can be absolutely at rest or absolutely moving -- should be that the first is false and the second true.

And it is clearly coherent to maintain that "true" falls into neither of these categories. For even when "f" itself is exclusively relative, the truth-values of explicitly relative "f"-propositions can perfectly well be absolute.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne's Relativism and Monadic Truth (Oxford University Press, 2009) argues that our ways of thinking and speaking about taste, epistemic modals, etc., which truth-relativists have wanted to explain by saying that certain complete propositions, <k is f>, can be true (or false) only relative to one or another perspective (A<sub>j</sub>), would be better explained as cases in which the fully articulated propositions are in fact of the form, <k is f relative to A<sub>j</sub>>, and are absolutely true or absolutely false.

But these particular invocations of contextualism (or object-level relativism) betray inflationary proclivities no less than truth-relativism does. For a thoroughgoing deflationist holds not merely that propositional truth is captured by the equivalence rule but also that any declarative sentence "k is f" fully expresses a proposition as long as it is not elliptical -- that is, as long as there would inevitably be a disagreement between the assertion that k is f and the assertion that k is not f. And the contextualist's reluctance to allow that (e.g.) 'Rhubarb is delicious' falls into this category stems from an inflation of that requirement on truth-aptness. The very features that lead the truth-relativist to deny that absolute truth can apply -- namely, unverifiability or unnaturalizability -- lead the contextualist to deny that there isn't even a full proposition here.

Note that I am not of course impugning all contextualist/object-relativist theses (-- e.g. those about 'left' and 'rest'). For in some cases an entrenched contextualism/object-relativism is clearly revealed by the linguistic data (-- e.g. that utterances of "x is to the left of y" and "x is not to the left of y" are often not regarded as expressing disagreements, and that amplifications of what is meant are often available that explain why not). And in other cases there are strong empirical-explanatory reasons to shift (at least within science) to an exclusively relativist form of discourse. I am criticizing only those contextualist-relativist theses for which there is no such support and where the motivation for them stems primarily from inflationist proclivities. (Thanks to Jason Stanley and Hartry Field for

It's also worth emphasizing that -- just as in the case of motion -- the fundamental question about truth is not whether respectable notions of relative truth (i) might be defined and introduced, or (ii) might already exist, or (iii) might play a significant explanatory or expressive role. The fundamental issue is whether or not there is such a thing as absolute truth applicable to propositions in all domains. And at the outset I sketched what I take to be an overwhelming case for thinking that there is. Whatever notions of relative truth may be recognized (for better or worse), there remains such a thing as good old absolute truth. And deflationism seems to provide the right account of it.

Assuming that to be so, let's turn to the three just-mentioned secondary issues.

First: it's obvious that notions of 'relative truth' can be introduced. As we have seen, one may simply stipulate, for a given kind of proposition, that " $\langle p \rangle$  is true relative to  $A_j$ " is to mean "The type- $T^k$  features of  $A_j$  (whatever they are) determine, in mode  $DET^q$ , that  $p$ ". Of course, it will be debatable whether such a stipulation would be apt, given what "true" already means. And my suggestion has been that someone will think so only if he is initially sympathetic to the idea that one of its familiar meanings is captured by an inflationary account.

Another conception of 'relative truth' -- deeply different -- is given by the schema:

$$\{k \text{ is } f\} \text{ is true relative to } C \leftrightarrow$$

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helping me to clarify my position on the relationship between truth-relativism and contextualism).



k is f relative to C.

Regarding this conception, it should be noted that we already use it.-- Consider: "It's raining", "No. That was true half an hour ago but isn't any longer." Thus, question (ii) -- as to whether there's any current deployment of relative truth -- might appear to have an affirmative answer. However, the concept of truth in play there applies not to complete propositions, properly so-called, but to propositional functions (i.e. unsaturated entities that yield full propositions only when applied to a context, C).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, its existence is hardly relevant to the debate over propositional truth.<sup>10</sup>

Turning to question (iii), these notions of relative truth are easily dispensed with -- either in favor of substantive determination theses, "DET<sup>q</sup> [T<sup>k</sup>(A<sub>j</sub>), p]", or in favor of propositions involving non-truth-theoretic, relativistic

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<sup>9</sup> See footnote 7 for a brief description of the linguistic evidence that bears on whether "k is f" does, or does not, fully articulate a proposition.

<sup>10</sup> It might be thought that there are a couple of further conceptions of relative truth: one of them implicitly defined by the schematic principle:--

The proposition that p is true relative to the S-propositions ↔ The S-propositions entail that p

and another by

The proposition that p is true relative to possible world w ↔ p in w

But in fact these principles merely deploy the deflationary notion of absolute truth. Given the equivalence rule, the first of them reformulates an obvious definition of "p relative to the S-propositions". And the second reformulates the tautology, "p in w ↔ p in w".

predication, <k is f relative to C>; so they would seem to have no important function.

For example, one might define an inflationary notion of relative truth as follows:

x is true relative to community  $A_j \leftrightarrow$   
nearly all members of  $A_j$  believe x

This would surely capture a coherent way of speaking. Indeed there are people who are happy to talk like that. But there's no particular need for to do so; and given the confusion it breeds it's best avoided.<sup>11</sup>

Let me elaborate these reflections by bringing them to bear on the work of John MacFarlane, a leading advocate of truth-relativism.<sup>12</sup> For him, the

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<sup>11</sup> For further criticism of truth-relativism see: Paul Boghossian's "What is Relativism", in P. Greenough and M. Lynch (eds.) Truth and Realism, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006; Boghossian's "Three Kinds of Relativism", forthcoming in S. Hales (ed.) A Companion to Relativism, Blackwell, 2011; Crispin Wright's "Fear of Relativism?", Philosophical Studies 141, 2008; and Wright's "Relativism about Truth Itself", in M. Carpintero and M. Kölbel (eds.) Relativizing Truth, Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Besides the works cited in footnote 2, see MacFarlane's "Making Sense of Relative Truth", Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 105, 2005, pp. 321-39; "Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths", in Max Kölbel and Manuel García-Carpintero (eds.) Relative Truth, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 81-102; "Epistemic Modals Are Assessment-Sensitive", forthcoming in Brian Weatherson and Andy Egan (eds.) Epistemic Modality, Oxford, Oxford University Press; "Relativism and Knowledge Attributions", forthcoming in Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard (eds.) Routledge Companion to Epistemology, London, Routledge; and "What Is Assertion", forthcoming in Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen (eds.) Assertion, Oxford, Oxford University Press. The most substantial exposition and defense of MacFarlane's position is his book, Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its

concept of relative truth earns its keep in the science of language. It offers, he suggests, an improved form of truth-theoretic semantics -- one that is better able to explain linguistic activity within certain domains of discourse than the orthodox form, whose key notion is absolute truth.<sup>13</sup> (For example, it should have the capacity to explain why any English speaker who loves the taste of rhubarb will be inclined to say, "Rhubarb is delicious", and why that person will be inclined to retract his earlier assertion once he comes to dislike the stuff).

Now, a body of truth-theoretic axioms and theorems can have the needed empirical import only if it is supplemented with principles that relate the reference/truth conditions of linguistic expressions to observable concrete facts about our use of them (e.g. to the just-mentioned fact about our use of "delicious"). MacFarlane acknowledges this requirement and maintains that it is to be met by norms that govern when sentences are to be asserted in light of their truth or falsity. However, I will suggest that this idea can be made to work only if it is construed to involve the sort of inflationist-inspired conception of relative truth that I have been criticizing.<sup>14</sup>

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Applications (still under revision but currently available in draft on his website).

<sup>13</sup> This is also Kölbel's view. See his "Truth in Semantics", Midwest Studies in Philosophy 32, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> MacFarlane accepts that no truth-theoretic semantics can be the explanatory core of an empirical science unless the notion of sentential-truth it deploys is more than a mere logical device. The notion must -- like 'magnetic', or 'pain', or 'stagflation' -- stand for a property with some fairly unified nature that issues in specific causal/explanatory powers. Consequently, the notion of 'x is true' associated with our ordinary, actual, deflationary concept of absolute

As just mentioned, the principles that give empirical import to truth are supposed to be norms of assertion.-- Specifically, for a semantics based on absolute truth the central norm would be:

S is permitted to assert only what is true,  
and is obliged to retract any prior assertion  
of his that isn't true

And for relative truth:

If S is in context  $A_j$ , then (i) he is permitted to assert only what is true relative to  $A_j$ ; and (ii) he is obliged to retract any (as yet un-retracted) prior assertion of his (regardless of the context in which it was made) that is false relative to  $A_j$

One immediate concern about this idea is whether such normative facts themselves could possibly have any empirical import. For surely what people ought to say, or are permitted to say, does not causally constrain what they will say (or will be disposed to say). One can't get an 'is' from an 'ought'! Therefore, what MacFarlane presumably has in mind is that the needed supplementary principles concern our respect for these norms, rather than their correctness. Thus, what is really supposed to be doing the empirical work is, roughly, that we have a propensity to satisfy them.

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propositional truth -- which is tantamount to the infinite disjunction:  $(x=<A> \ \& \ A) \vee (x=<B> \ \& \ B) \vee \dots$  -- cannot serve. Nor, for the same reason, can the affiliated deflationary notion that is defined directly by a disquotation principle.

But do we have any such propensity? Within a semantics based on absolute truth, the assumption would be that there's a strong correlation between

w is true of fs and only fs

and (roughly)

A sentence predicating w of something will tend to be accepted if and only if that thing is an f

However it's pretty clear that we have no unconditional disposition to apply a predicate to the things of which it is true. For what we accept depends heavily on what else we happen to think about the objects in question.<sup>15</sup>

Nor can a defender of truth-theoretic semantics finesse this difficulty by simply denying that he is deploying the ordinary notion of truth, and taking the extension of his new, theoretical notion to be defined by the things to which our predicates tend to be applied. For, as we've just seen, such applications depend heavily on background assumptions, which vary considerably from one person to another and from one time to another. Therefore there are no natural sets of things to which we have law-like propensity to apply our predicates. So a semantic theory along those lines couldn't possibly be explanatory.

Can a semantics based on relative truth fare any better? The shape for such a theory is suggested by modifying the above (rather poor!) substantive account of absolute truth (where the truth of a sentence will be explained, roughly speaking, in

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<sup>15</sup> See Paul Boghossian's "The Rule-Following Considerations", Mind 98(392), 1989, pp. 507-49.

terms of our disposition to accept it) in light of the template for notions of relative truth that was presented at the beginning of this paper -- according to which

u is true relative to  $A_j$

is reduced to something of the form

$DET^q [T^k(A_j), u]$ .<sup>16</sup>

The results is:

(RT-u) u is true relative to  $A_j$   $\equiv$   
The  $T^k$ -features of  $A_j$  entail that  
u tends to be accepted in  $A_j$

And this will indeed be an improvement upon the corresponding principle for absolute truth. For there may well exist a general tendency to accept (or reject) u in certain narrow circumstances even if there's too much variation in epistemological background for there to exist a general, unconditional tendency to accept (or reject) u.

Thus conformity with (RT-u) may well explain what is uttered in terms of what is true (and false)

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<sup>16</sup> Within a truth-theoretic semantics the operative notion must be one of sentential-truth (or of utterance-truth) rather than propositional truth; and so I have modified my initial relativistic template accordingly.

Complications derive from the fact that, for many utterance-types, the proposition expressed by a given instance will depend on the context in which it is produced. But since we are concerned here with 'relativity to an assessment context', we can harmlessly simplify our discussion by focusing on sentences whose propositional contents are context independent.

relative to the speaker's context of assessment. But it still wouldn't provide a sufficiently substantial link between truth and non-semantic phenomena. For unless we have some way of explaining those truth-theoretic facts in terms of the features that characterize assessment contexts, we still won't be able to see why an assessor asserts what he does (or retracts what he does) given his non-semantic circumstances. For example, it's not enough to suppose that someone will tend to assert "Rhubarb is delicious" if it is true relative to her context of assessment. That won't put us in a position to explain what we want unless we also suppose that an assessment context involving someone who loves the taste of rhubarb is a context relative to which that sentence is true. Thus the principles that relate truth-theoretic properties to non-semantic phenomena must go upstream as well as downstream.-- Yes, they must dictate the use-theoretic implications of 'being true (or false) relative to  $A_j$ '; but they must also dictate the truth-theoretic implications of an assessment context characterized by features,  $F^k_j$  -- that is, they must include the relative-truth conditions of sentences.

To repeat: in order to explain truth-theoretically why all and only speakers in circumstances  $F^k_j$  tend to assert  $u$ , it must be supposed not merely -- as implied by (RT- $u$ ) -- that

$u$  is true relative to  $A_j \leftrightarrow$   
 The  $T^k$ -features of  $A_j$  induce a  
 tendency to accept  $u$

but also that

$u$  is true relative to  $A_j \leftrightarrow$   
 The  $T^k$ -features of  $A_j$  include  $F^k_j$

In the case of "Rhubarb is delicious" the proposal is that the meaning of this sentence is partly characterized by its relative-truth condition -- by the fact that

It is true relative to all and only the assessment contexts that involve being a person who greatly enjoys the taste of rhubarb

Given, in addition, the assumed nature of relative truth -- roughly, that

Someone will tend to assert something if and only if it is true in his assessment context

that meaning-fact enables us to understand why all and only those who love the taste of rhubarb will tend to think and say, "Rhubarb is delicious".

It seems to me that the best hope for a relative-truth-theoretic semantics runs along these lines. Moreover, we obtain a fairly natural reconstruction of what MacFarlane actually says. Going back to his idea that truth's empirical import stem from "norms of assertion" -- and understanding this (charitably) to mean that our implicit respect for such norms is what matters -- we can take him to have been supposing that in a semantics based on absolute truth the main operative principle would be roughly that

We have a tendency to assert only what is true, and to retract prior assertions that we now take to be false

And that a better semantics, at least for certain domains of discourse, would replace this with principles of the form

We have a tendency both to assert what is true (and only what is true) relative to our current



assessment context and to retract what was previously asserted if (and only if) it is false relative to it

In both types of semantics, the absurd consequences that would result from "true" being given its ordinary (deflationary) meaning are avoided by supposing that we are here deploying a new, inflationary notions of truth that is defined by those principles.

But there remains the serious objection -- implicit in the first part of this paper -- that the real explanatory work of such a relativistic theory would be done by use-theoretic facts -- facts about the non-semantic circumstances in which sentences are asserted. The possibility of viewing such a story as a "truth-theoretic semantics" depends upon these facts being re-described as matters of "relative truth". But it's hard to see any explanatory gain in this terminological move. Or, to put it another way: we have that

Assessment context  $A_j$  has  $T^k$ -features  $F_j^k$   
 $\leftrightarrow$   $u$  is true relative to  $A_j$   
 $\leftrightarrow$  Assessors in  $A_j$  tend to assert  $u$   
(in virtue of  $A_j$ 's  $T^k$ -features)

But who needs the middle-man? <sup>17</sup>

This invocation of 'relative truth' is not only explanatorily redundant, but misleading. Given that the deflationary notion of absolute truth is the one we already have and need, and given that the proposed

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<sup>17</sup> The particular use-theoretic approach to which MacFarlane's theory appears to reduce bears certain affinities to the one that I develop in Meaning, Oxford University Press, 1998, Reflections on Meaning, Oxford University Press, 2005, and Truth-Meaning-Reality, Oxford University Press, 2010.

new semantic term stands neither for a relativization of that familiar notion, nor for a relativization of any other notion of absolute truth that is actually deployed, it's hard to see that anything but the potential for confusion could be achieved by calling relative acceptance "relative truth" and calling the account of meaning based on relative acceptance a "truth-theoretic semantics".

Of course there are advocates of relative-truth-theoretic semantics who will respond that they see no reason to accept my suggested articulation of its abstract structure, and who don't expect that their operative notion of relative truth will prove to be reducible or dispensable. But any such theorists are obliged:

- (i) To spell out, for at least some domains of discourse, what their theory actually is.
- (ii) To illustrate its capacity to explain the concrete facts of linguistic activity within those domains.
- (iii) To show that its deployment of relative truth plays an essential role in these explanations; to show, in particular, that its account of the acceptance conditions of sentences in terms of their relative-truth conditions combined with its account of the latter in terms of non-semantic features of assessment contexts could not be simplified and improved by dropping the middle term and thereby acknowledging that the proposed semantics is, in substance, nothing but a use-theory in truth-theoretic clothing, a theory in which the meanings of words are identified with the acceptance conditions of certain sentences containing them.

- (iv) To argue that the key theoretical notion has enough in common with our ordinary concept of truth for a semanticist to be justified in calling it a notion of truth. And
- (v) To acknowledge that insofar as their reason for endorsing 'truth'-relativism comes from the scientific explanatory power of their semantic theory, they must refrain from arguing for it on the basis of intuitive considerations that are tied to the ordinary use of "true" (e.g. intuitions about faultless disagreement, or the alleged weirdness of supposing that there are genuine truths of deliciousness, of what ought to be done, etc.).

I think it's fair to complain that few, if any, of these challenges have been met, or even properly confronted.

In case this discussion should have seemed somewhat meandering, let me summarize its line of thought. I have urged the following points:

1. Our actual concept of truth is absolute.
2. A deflationary account of it is correct.
3. This concept is valuable and unobjectionable.
4. So it should not be abandoned in favor of a relativistic concept.
5. Certain inflationary theories of absolute truth (in which 'truth' is identified with one or another form of 'determination') could be naturally replaced (for certain domains) with affiliated theories of relative truth (explained as 'relative determination')

or 'determination by such-and-such contextual factors').

6. But insofar as the initial theory does not successfully capture truth, the relativistic replacement won't really concern relative truth, properly so called.

7. Granted, a form of 'relative determination' -- in particular, 'conditions that determine sentence-acceptance' -- may well prove to be explanatorily valuable in semantics. But nothing good could come of re-naming them "relative truth conditions".<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> My thanks to Paul Boghossian, Max Kölbel, Jason Stanley, and Crispin Wright for their generous and incisive comments. I'm also grateful for valuable feedback from audiences at the Northern Institute of Philosophy, Aberdeen (May 2010), at the Torino-Bologna conference on "Truth (and Relativism)" (June 2010), and at the "Truth Be Told" workshop at the University of Amsterdam (March 2011).

The first half of this paper is a substantially revised and expanded version of Section 5 of Chapter 1 ("What is Truth?") of my Truth-Meaning-Reality, Oxford University Press, 2010. The second half, focused on MacFarlane's brand of truth-relativism, is entirely new.