

Précis of *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*

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Assessment Sensitivity has two interconnected aims. The first is to give a clear account of what it is to be a relativist about truth. Most of the copious philosophical ink that has been spilled over truth relativism has been devoted to refutations of the thesis, or defenses against these refutations, with neither side saying very clearly what the thesis amounts to. I propose a way of understanding the thesis that makes it philosophically interesting, but not so interesting that it becomes indefensible. I try to say clearly exactly what one needs to show in order to establish that truth is relative in this sense.

The second aim of the book is to make available a new way of understanding perspectival thought and talk. There is a standard menu of options here, including forms of objectivism, contextualism, and expressivism. To these options I want to add another: an expression can be *assessment-sensitive*. That is, its extension can be sensitive, not to the context in which it is used, but to the context from which it is assessed.

These two aims are related, because, on my view, relativism about truth is best understood as a commitment to the possibility of assessment sensitivity. Making sense of this commitment requires substantial philosophical work. The idea that a single assertion might be as true, as assessed from one context, and false, as assessed from another, is not one that we have a clear antecedent grip on.

Accordingly, the book falls into two main parts. The first part (Chapters 1–6) is devoted to articulating and making philosophical sense of assessment sensitivity, the second (Chapters 7–12) to arguing that a number of philosophically interesting kinds of discourse exhibit assessment sensitivity. The first part is a priori and conceptual. It tries to say what a linguistic practice that involves assessment sensitivity would look like. By doing this it makes coherent sense of relativism about truth. The second part looks carefully at how we use language and argues that the best descriptive semantic theory for the target expressions takes them to be assessment-sensitive.

Chapter 1 motivates the project using an easily-grasped example. After considering problems with objectivist, contextualist, and expressivist approaches to the meaning of “tasty,” I articu-

late desiderata for a successful approach and argue that meeting them requires denying that a particular occurrence of “tasty,” in a context, has its extension absolutely.

Chapter 2 considers a number of classic objections to relativism about truth, with a view to identifying problems that any defense of truth relativism must solve.

Chapter 3 asks what the relativist’s thesis comes to. The usual approach to this question is to ask how to fill in the schema: “the truth of X is relative to Y .” Some ways of filling in the schema yield theses that are not particularly interesting or controversial. For example, everyone will concede that the truth of an indexical sentence like “I am in China” can be relative to the speaker and the time of utterance. It is usually assumed that to get an interesting statement of truth relativism one must fill in X with “proposition” or “utterance” and Y with something like “judges”, “tastes”, “perspectives”, or “aesthetic standards.” I argue that this is the wrong way to pose the question, and the wrong way to answer it. On the one hand, there are recognizably truth-relativist views that do not relativize propositional truth to anything but possible worlds (see Chapter 9). And on the other hand, there are ways of relativizing propositional truth to subjective factors like tastes that should not count as truth-relativist, since they retain the idea that whether an assertion of is made truly—whether it is objectively correct—is an absolute matter. The philosophically interesting line is crossed, I argue, when we have relativity of truth—either of sentences or of propositions—to possible contexts of assessment.

Chapter 4 considers what a truth relativist should say about propositions. An answer to this question is not required for the statement of a relativist thesis, since assessment sensitivity can be defined for sentences (as in Chapter 3). But it is required if we want to make theoretical use of propositions. I argue against content relativism, the idea that which proposition is expressed by a sentence varies with the context of assessment. I rebut some general arguments against the possibility that the intensions of propositions vary with factors like tastes or information states, and I note that countenancing such intensions does not by itself require countenancing assessment sensitivity. I distinguish a class of *nonindexical contextualist* views which resemble truth-relativist views in recognizing variability of propositional truth with factors like tastes, but resemble contextualist views in taking the correctness of an assertion of such a proposition to be settled by the facts about the context of use. And I explain how the monadic truth predicate works in a relativist framework.

Chapter 5 tackles the philosophical question raised by the framework developed in Chapters 3 and 4: what does it *mean* to say that something is true as used from one context and assessed from another? I begin with a general picture of the role of truth-conditional semantic theories in a larger theory of language use, and then show how that picture can be modified to make room for assessment sensitivity. The resulting framework allows us to see clearly the practical difference between a contextualist and a relativist theory in some domain. Though these theories

will typically make the same predictions about when speakers are permitted to make assertions, they will diverge in their predictions about when speakers must retract earlier assertions.

One of the selling points of relativist views is that they can make better sense than contextualist views of the *disagreement* we find in the target domains. Chapter 6 probes this claim by distinguishing several varieties of disagreement and asking which of them can be vindicated by which sorts of semantic theories.

If Chapters 2–6 are successful, then they give us a coherent understanding of what it would be for a linguistic practice to be assessment-sensitive, and resources for describing a class of linguistic practices that cannot be described in standard semantic theories. But that is not very interesting unless there actually are linguistic practices that are aptly described that way. The task of Chapters 7–11 is to make a preliminary case that there are, arguing for an assessment-sensitive treatment of predicates of taste, knowledge attributions, future contingents, epistemic and deontic modals, and indicative conditionals. Each of these topics has spawned a huge philosophical literature, and there is no hope of arguing comprehensively for the superiority of an assessment-sensitive treatment over all possible alternatives. But I hope to have said enough to give some plausibility to the assessment-sensitive treatments, and to have shown how compositional semantic theories can be given for them.

Even if Chapters 7–11 are successful in making an empirical case for an assessment-sensitive treatment of certain kinds of discourse, one might wonder *why* these kinds of discourse are assessment-sensitive. And, even if one grasps what it would *be* to play the language games described by assessment-sensitive theories, one might wonder whether it could ever be rational to play such games. A relativist account of epistemic modals predicts, for example, that after a baby girl has been born, one ought to retract an earlier assertion *that it might be a boy*—not because one made the assertion inappropriately, but because one is now in an information state relative to which its content is false. Can it be rational to make assertions when one knows that one will very likely have to retract them? Chapter 12 investigates this question and addresses it by giving an engineering rationale for assessment sensitivity. Given plausible hypotheses about the purposes of claims of taste, knowledge attributions, and epistemic modals, we can see why a relativist practice would serve these purposes better than a contextualist one.

References

MacFarlane, John. 2014. *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.