

Trumping Assessments and the Aristotelian Future

Author(s): Sebastiano Moruzzi and Crispin Wright

Source: *Synthese*, Vol. 166, No. 2 (Jan., 2009), pp. 309-331

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40271144>

Accessed: 22-11-2017 10:37 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Springer* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Synthese*

## Trumping assessments and the aristotelian future

Sebastiano Moruzzi · Crispin Wright

Received: 5 July 2007 / Accepted: 16 October 2007 / Published online: 7 May 2008  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2008

**Abstract** In the paper we argue that truth-relativism is potentially hostage to a problem of exhibiting witnesses of its own truth. The problem for the relativist stems from acceptance of a trumping principle according to which there is a dependency between ascriptions of truth of an utterance and ascriptions of truth to other ascriptions of truth of that utterance. We argue that such a dependency indeed holds in the case of future contingents and the case of epistemic modals and that, consequently, the relativist about these domains cannot exhibit witnesses to his relativism. In the appendix we provide some results on the relation between trumping and multi-order relativism.

**Keywords** Truth-relativism · Future contingents · Epistemic modals · Multi-order relativism · Trumping

“Can I get a witness? I want a witness”

—Marvin Gaye (Tamla Records 1963)

---

S. Moruzzi · C. Wright  
Arché AHRC Philosophical Research Centre, University of St. Andrews,  
St. Andrews, Scotland

S. Moruzzi  
University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

C. Wright (✉)  
Department of Philosophy, New York University,  
New York, NY 10003, USA  
e-mail: cjgw@st-andrews.ac.uk

## 1 Truth-relativism

For our purposes, truth-relativism can be characterised as the doctrine that in a single world the very same token utterance<sup>1</sup> can take different truth-values when considered in different contexts of assessment. The root semantic idea is already present in Lewis 1980, where an utterance of a sentence like “It is raining” is conceived as receiving a truth-value only when the value of a parameter of place—an ‘index’—is fixed to which there is no semantic reference (not even by an ‘unarticulated constituent’) in the utterance in question. Truth-relativism is what you get for a region of discourse when you construe its utterances as dealing in contents relevantly like that of “It is raining” on the Lewis treatment,—but then add in the idea that the truth-values of utterances of *these* contents is dependent upon a new kind of index whose value is not settled once and for all by a context of utterance, but varies with certain variable characteristics of (hypothetical) assessments.<sup>2</sup> If truth relativism so defined holds for a certain utterance, the utterance is *assessment-sensitive*.

The doctrine is widely regarded as providing one way to underwrite the (alleged) possibility of *faultless disagreement* (Kölbel 2003; Wright 2006, forthcoming). Consider a sommelier with a preference for Cabernet grapes who holds that Sassicaia is superior to Barolo and another sommelier who, on the contrary, favours the Nebbiolo grapes and (apparently) denies what the other sommelier has asserted. Can the two genuinely disagree without implication of fault on either side? Truth-relativism offers an apparently easy answer: while both of them are (or can be) expressing judgement on the same utterance, viz. the first sommelier’s assertion of “Sassicaia is superior to Barolo”, they (may) rightly evaluate it in two different ways from their respective contexts of assessment if standards of taste in wine are taken as the relevant index.

In recent debates, the idea that there are assessment-sensitive utterances has been advanced to vouchsafe possibilities of faultless disagreement over a variety of types of subject matter—taste, aesthetics and morals, epistemic modals and knowledge-ascriptions, and the case of future contingent statements, for example. In a series of connected publications,<sup>3</sup> John MacFarlane in particular has covered remarkable ground in elaboration and defence the coherence of the idea in a number of these regions—though his motivations have not in general been focused on faultless disagreement. Much of the debate has rightly been located in the philosophy of language, preoccupied with the assessment-relativists’ hostages to the theory of content and the force of the linguistic evidence adduced in support of their proposals. In this paper,

<sup>1</sup> We here set aside the issue whether the contents of utterances that are the bearers of relative truth in a given region of discourse can be anything very like *propositions* as traditionally conceived—whether, for example, there is any good sense in which a pair of thinkers each of whom comprehendingly accepts a particular such utterance as true, can be said to *agree*. The issues here are of course absolutely crucial to the interpretation and evaluation of truth-relativism in general but they are off the agenda of the present discussion. For discussion in depth, see Cappelen and Hawthorne (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> You *could* so conceive of utterances of “It is raining”. The result would be a conception of the truth-conditions of weather reports where the parameter of relevant place was determined by properties of an assessor, rather than the utterer. How bizarre that might be would depend on *which* properties of the assessor did the job.

<sup>3</sup> See list of References.

however, our concern will be less with the evaluation of particular recent relativist proposals and debates than with a certain class of more general, structural issues about truth-relativism that seem overdue for attention.

In the following we will make use of a dyadic metalinguistic truth-predicate, “ $T(\dots, \dots)$ ” taking as its arguments utterances and contexts of assessment respectively. It will be important to keep in mind that the focus of the paper is on this kind of *meta-linguistic* statement, and not on truth-ascriptions within an object language. The main issues we want to consider concern the theoretical expression of the relativist thesis itself. We will not, except in one place,<sup>4</sup> be directly concerned with issues concerning the use of “true” and its cognates within an object language in which assessment-sensitive utterances are notionally made.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Attestability and orders of relativism

Truth-relativism, it hardly needs to be said, is a controversial view in any region of discourse. The truth-relativist needs to justify his theory. That means, we will take it, that he has to be able to formulate and then support, at least to his own satisfaction, the claim that a certain (type of) targeted utterance is assessment-sensitive. A canonical way to express that claim is presumably this:

(*Rel*)  $(\exists U, ca_1, ca_2)(T(U, ca_1) \ \& \ \sim T(U, ca_2))$ ,

where ‘ $U$ ’ ranges over utterances of the type in question, ‘ $ca_1$ ’, ‘ $ca_2$ ’, etc., range over the kind of assessment-contexts to which the relativity in question is being claimed, and ‘ $T(U, ca_k)$ ’ says that  $U$  is true relative to  $ca_k$ .

A number of questions arise immediately to which the relativist in any particular case owes (seldom provided) answers. Is (*Rel*) itself an absolute claim? Should philosophy generally be thought of as trafficking in absolute claims? If not, what are the relevant assessment-contextual parameters for philosophical claims? If so, does it follow—letting ‘ $CA_1$ ’, ‘ $CA_2$ ’, etc., denote specific assessment-contexts—that any putative witness of (*Rel*):

$$T(U, CA_1) \ \& \ \sim T(U, CA_2),$$

is also an absolute claim? Or could one coherently combine the thesis that (*Rel*) is an absolute truth with respect to a given region of discourse with the view that all *specific* witnesses for it with respect to that discourse are themselves assessment-sensitive:

<sup>4</sup> See Sect. 7.

<sup>5</sup> What about relativism about the truth of *propositions*? Well, the idea of the assessment-sensitivity of utterances and the related idea, of the assessment-sensitivity of propositions, coincide if one assumes first that something worth calling a proposition is expressed by an assessment-sensitive utterance and second that what proposition is so expressed is settled wholly by the context of the uttering—the context of use. So focusing our attention on utterances will not divest our discussion of bearing upon truth-relativist theses about propositions, or whatever the associated contents are, provided variation in the content expressed by a sentence can occur only via variation in the indices of the context of use. (In fact, whenever we consider variations in assessment-context in the sequel, either the same token utterance will be under assessment, or we will be dealing with utterances of sentences that are presumed to have no indexical element.)

that while it is an absolute truth that truth is assessment-sensitive in the region of discourse in question, it is an assessment-sensitive matter how exactly this absolute truth is witnessed? If that is not a coherent combination and witness claims like the above are absolute, then so are their conjuncts. So in that case there is no question of *higher-order* relativism—relativism about the truth-status of claims of the form, “ $T(U, ca_k)$ ”, where ‘ $U$ ’ ranges over utterances that already provide the subject matter of a proposed relativism. But as we shall see, while relativism about some range of utterances,  $U$ , cannot presumably of itself *require* extension to higher orders, the main focus of the present discussion—the attempt to harness relativistic ideas to stabilise a certain broadly Aristotelian conception of the future<sup>6</sup>—must make precisely such an extension if it is to accommodate all the ingredients in the intuitive view whose stabilisation is aimed at.

In general, it is open, and under-investigated, what combinations of simultaneous, multi-order relativisms are coherent, and what are the conditions for their coherence. Here of course it matters whether the higher-order relativisms involve just the same assessment-contextual variables, or whether they change—so that, for instance, it is moral standards that supply the assessment-contextual parameter at first-order and say, logics (!) that do so at second. Another major issue is whether relativism’s traditional *even-handedness*—the idea that conflicting assessments of utterances in the range of  $U$  may not merely be mandated under differing assessment-contexts but can be, in some sense, equally valid or good—can be serviced unless the theorist goes absolute with respect to claims of the form,  $T(U, ca_k)$ . In the present climate of renaissance of interest in truth-relativism, all these neglected questions demand attention. The discussion to follow will take some initial steps towards the development of a framework for thinking about them by working through an aspect of the aristotelian example in detail.

Let a relativism for a particular region of discourse count as *attestable* just in case a proponent can coherently adduce a witness for its characteristic instance of (*Rel*); that is, to repeat, a claim of the form

$$T(U, CA_1) \ \& \ \sim T(U, CA_2),$$

where  $CA_1$  and  $CA_2$  are assessment contexts varying in the value they assign to the parameter which the relativism in question claims that truth in that region is relative to. Our thesis will be that aristotelian relativism—assessment-relativism harnessed to the specific project of providing a coherent platform for a broadly Aristotelian conception of the contingent future as unsettled (as long as it is future)—*cannot attest to itself*. Specifically, although the proposal can of course formulate witnesses of the relevant instance of (*Rel*), it is not consistent with other aspects of the view that an assertion of

<sup>6</sup> We intend no more than to caption a certain kind of view by this term. The view in question is excellently laid out in MacFarlane (2003). We make no suggestion either that Aristotle himself was in any way at all a forerunner of assessment-relativism—“Aristotelian” relativism is surely no more Aristotelian than Hume’s Principle is Hume’s—or that he embraced all the components of the broad view of the future that the form of relativist proposal we shall consider is aimed at stabilising. In what follows we shall use the lower case “aristotelian” whenever no historical claim is intended.

them can ever be justified, no matter what the assessment-context in which justification is attempted.<sup>7</sup>

### 3 Trumping

*Second-order absoluteness* with respect to a region of discourse is the thesis that any two relativistic truth-ascriptions to one of its utterances—say,  $\sim T(U, CA_1)$  and  $T(U, CA_2)$ —are themselves assessment-insensitive: no matter what the context in which they are assessed, their respective assessments should be the same. A source of potential conflict with second-order absoluteness, in the presence of first-order relativism, are certain kinds of dependency relations between ascriptions of truth to U and ascriptions of truth to other ascriptions of truth to U. If the facts as assessed relative to one assessment-context determine, from that context or another, their proper assessment relative to a second, we say that the former assessment-context *trumps* the latter.

Among the possibilities for such a dependency, we want to draw attention to two cases where the relevant truth-ascriptions are of the respective forms,  $T(U, ca_1)$  and  $T(T(U, ca_2), ca_1)$ . They are these. We have *inward trumping* with respect to an utterance U if whenever U is true relative to a context of assessment,  $ca_1$ , it is thereby true from that same context of assessment that U is true relative to *any other* context of assessment. That is:

$$(\text{Inward trumping}) \quad (\forall ca_1, ca_2)(T(U, ca_1) \supset T(T(U, ca_2), ca_1))$$

We term this “inward trumping” because the direction of determination goes from the outer assessment-context in the consequent— $ca_1$ —to the inner. Inward trumping involves that any assessment-context of U behaves as an *inclusive perspective*: from the perspective of that assessment-context, any other assessment-contexts is viewed as mandating the same evaluation of U as is mandated by it.

By contrast, we have *outward trumping* with respect to an utterance U if whenever it is true from a context of assessment  $ca_1$  that U is true relative to some other assessment-context, U is true relative to the context of assessment  $ca_1$ . That is

$$(\text{Outward trumping}) \quad (\forall ca_1, ca_2)(T(T(U, ca_2), ca_1) \supset T(U, ca_1))$$

This, correspondingly, is termed “outward trumping” because the direction of determination goes from the inner assessment context of the antecedent— $ca_2$ —to the outer. Outward trumping involves that any assessment-context  $ca_2$  for an utterance of

<sup>7</sup> A disclaimer. In advancing this thesis, our primary concern is with the development of the apparatus by means of which the problem is elicited, and the general agenda of issues which it brings into focus, rather than with whether it provides the means to nail particular actual relativist proposals—in particular, of course, those of MacFarlane himself—concerning the metaphysics of the future. Our thesis is that assessment-relativism cannot stabilise the view we will outline save by making a serious problem for itself. But the target ‘aristotelianism’ can of course be modified. It would be for a sequel investigation to determine what revision of the crucial features of that view, still in the same spirit, might be well motivated, or whether extant relativist treatments are required, or can succeed, in providing a platform for such variant views.

U behaves as an *exporting perspective*: to sanction the correctness of a truth-ascription,  $T(U, ca_2)$ , relative to  $ca_1$  commits one to the truth of U relative to  $ca_1$  itself.<sup>8</sup>

It is salient that a relativist about some discourse who regarded both trumping principles as good would thereby commit himself to second-order relativism. For suppose  $T(U, CA_1)$  and  $\sim T(U, CA_2)$ . Then from the former, by inward trumping, we may infer  $T(T(U, CA_2), CA_1)$  while from the latter, taking ' $CA_2$ ' for both ' $ca_1$ ' and ' $ca_2$ ', we have by contraposition in outward trumping that  $\sim T(T(U, CA_2), CA_2)$ .

The latter move, where outward trumping is specialised to a single assessment context:

$$(\forall ca_k)(T(T(U, ca_k), ca_k) \supset T(U, ca_k)),$$

is worthy of remark. Taken in conjunction with the corresponding specialisation of inward trumping:

$$(\forall ca_k)(T(U, ca_k) \supset T(T(U, ca_k), ca_k))$$

it provides something tantamount to a kind of disquotational principle for the metalinguistic relative truth-predicate,

$$(\forall ca_k)(T(U, ca_k) \equiv T(T(U, ca_k), ca_k)),$$

requiring that assessment-contexts should be constrained to provide for *accurate self-assessment*. That may seem to be a principle that any coherent assessment-relativism should want to endorse. If so, we may conclude that any coherent assessment-relativism at  $n$ th order which allows inward trumping will need to extend to the  $n+1$ th order as well.<sup>9, 10</sup>

#### 4 Why might a relativist endorse some form of trumping?

Neither form of trumping seems to draw any general support simply from the broad framework of truth-relativism *per se*. Indeed, as the reader will speedily see, each is a consequence of a generalised absolutism and to that extent, it might seem, a

<sup>8</sup> We have stated the two trumping principles in full generality. Obviously there is conceptual space for of more local cases. It may be, for example, that—in a particular region of discourse—trumping, in one or both directions, obtains only for assessment-contexts meeting certain conditions, or even that one particular assessment-context (God's?) is unique in trumping others. There are potentially interesting complications here, but they will not be further explored in the present discussion.

<sup>9</sup> What about the converse? Does the existence of witnesses for higher-order relativism—of the form, say, of  $\sim T(T(U, CA_2), CA_1)$  &  $T(T(U, CA_2), CA_2)$ —impose instances of either of the trumping principles? We conjecture not, or at least not on any plausible collateral assumptions. But the matter awaits further investigation.

<sup>10</sup> It's natural to think of the operation of principles of trumping as enforcing patterns of *deference* among assessors. But the thought is not quite right. To defer is to accept the mandates of another perspective in place of what is mandated by one's own. Being trumped, by contrast, involves that another perspective gets, not to *override* the mandates of one's own perspective, but to determine what they are.

compromise of relativism—a principle from the camp of the enemy, as it were.<sup>11</sup> In any case, it seems to be a question to be determined locally for each area of (allegedly) relativistic discourse in turn whether or not either (or both) of the trumping principles are motivated.<sup>12</sup>

They certainly seem completely untoward in the basic case—that of assessment relativism about taste. Let's suppose that Paul and Barry are the two sommeliers, and that Paul affirms “Sassicaia is superior to Barolo”—let's call this utterance SB. Consider the following sentences:

(1)  $T(SB, CA_{\text{Paul}})$

(2)  $T(T(SB, CA_{\text{Barry}}), CA_{\text{Paul}})$ ,

where  $CA_{\text{Paul}}$  and  $CA_{\text{Barry}}$  are the contexts of assessment that Paul and Barry respectively occupy in evaluating SB—contexts which select the operative standards for evaluating a wine.

Consider the case where Paul's operative standards do indeed assess SB as true, so (1) is true. If inward trumping held, that would entail the truth of (2). Hence, Paul's standards would mandate not merely his own favourable verdict on Sassicaia but the judgment that Barry's standards too mandate that verdict. Such a suggestion looks bizarre: how can a truth-ascription involving in its content reference to one standard of taste (Barry's standard)—i.e., that SB is true relative to Barry's standards—be deemed to be correct on the basis of different standards (Paul's standards) of *taste*? For one thing, one would suppose, SB may actually be false by Barry's standards—as he himself takes it to be. For another, standards of taste, while they may mandate one or another verdict about a wine, surely have no bearing on the question whether the wine is good, and an appropriate utterance correspondingly true, *relative to other standards of taste*. The latter question is not, intuitively, a matter of taste at all.

Trumping, in either direction, empowers acceptances of the claim that Paul's ‘oenological perspective’ includes Sassicaia in the extension of “superior wine” to boss the facts as assessed from Barry's oenological perspective.<sup>13</sup> Why should a taste-relativist want anything to do with that? Intuitively, the heart and soul of the relativistic point about this kind of case is that the standards that contrive to generate a disagreement may simply respectively determine *each* of the conflicting classifications as

<sup>11</sup> For proof, see the Appendix (Thesis III).

<sup>12</sup> It is plausible (thanks here to Elia Zardini) that the two forms of trumping principle are interderivable in the presence of principles of the form:

$$(\forall ca_k)(\sim T(U, ca_k) \equiv T(\neg U, ca_k)),$$

where ‘U’ ranges over both utterances in the base discourse and *n*th-order assessments of them, ‘ $\sim$ ’ is regular negation in the metalanguage, and ‘ $\neg U$ ’ is an object-language utterance expressing the broad negation of the proposition expressed by U (that is, the claim that that proposition is not true.) Since nothing of philosophical interest in the context of the present discussion hangs on the matter, we defer further investigation of the relations between the two forms of trumping to another occasion.

<sup>13</sup> If Barry learns that (1) is true, the appropriate instance of outward trumping will force him to conclude that SB is true from his own perspective. And inward trumping will force Paul to regard Barry as misassessing Sassicaia from Barry's own point of view if Barry takes a different view.



correct. It seems clear that trumping must be disowned when relativism is harnessed to this traditional even-handed kind of thought.

But does, or ought, trumping to hold in others of the areas of discourse where truth-relativism has been proposed? We will suggest that aristotelian relativism supplies a case in point. Specifically, that—by the lights of the aristotelian view—a form of inward trumping seems to be mandated for future contingent statements, with consequences that we will develop.

## 5 Future contingents

Consider a future contingent statement such as:

(*Peace*) There will be peace in Middle East in 2020.

The form of aristotelian view we will consider incorporates two crucial claims. The first is an *Indeterminacy claim*: that the contingent future is unsettled in the precise sense that there are, while it is still future, no truths about it: no truths about what will contingently be. The traditional motivation for this line, familiarly, is the notion that otherwise we must accept a repugnant form of determinism.<sup>14</sup> If a full repertoire of propositions about how the future will turn out are *already* true, then they have been so since time immemorial, indeed always, and hence the circumstances in virtue of which they are true must somehow already be in place, before the relevant aspects of the future unfold. What scope, then, for human intervention and influence?<sup>15</sup>

So, to assert a token of (*Peace*) at the present time is, in the view under consideration, to make a claim with no truth-value. But what about the situation when 2020 comes? Everyone will agree that when relevant matters are assessed in 2020, there will then be a mandate—prescinding from any material vagueness in (*Peace*)—to affirm, or deny the proposition that an utterance of (*Peace*) now expresses, since relevant matters will have been settled. But there is an additional, very intuitive claim: that when 2020 comes, the prediction made by the 2007 utterance will then be shown *to have been* true, or false—that the mandate conferred by the events up to and including 2020 will extend to a *retrospective* verdict on the 2007 utterance of (*Peace*), so that someone who affirms it now (2007) will then (2020) properly be said to have spoken truly, or falsely, as the case may be, *at the time of speaking*. Call that the *Determinacy claim*: it says, in effect, that when the future is settled, it will also settle aspects of the (present)

<sup>14</sup> The modern *locus classicus* for this line of thought is of course Lukasiewicz's "On Determinism". See his 1970.

<sup>15</sup> It is, to stress, quite outside the scope of the present discussion to take any stand on this train of thought,—which seemingly *is* one that Aristotle had—or even on its plausibility. Our interest is wholly in the question whether *if* it is accepted, along with the Determinacy claim about to be outlined, truth-relativism provides a way of stabilising the resulting package. We cannot forbear to observe, however, that all the pressure towards the Indeterminacy claim rests on the presupposition that no viable distinction can be made between *eternal* truths—truths that always were and always will be true—and *timeless* truth: truth expressed by a tenseless predicate, "is true". It is the idea that one of the disjuncts of the Sea-fight disjunction is *already* true that sets up the anxiety. That is a consequence of conceding that one of them has to be eternally true. Timeless truth, by contrast, will entail nothing about truth-at-a-time, understood so as to require that the facts conferring truth are, so to speak, already in place. We briefly return to this thought in Sect. 8 below.

present, that is, the future past. Of what in fact proves to have transpired it will truly be affirmable that it *was going to* transpire, so that it is true to say that one who predicted the actual course of events spoke truly at the time of her prediction, even though this cannot truly be said before what she predicted “comes true”, as we are wont to say.

It is a nice question what drives the Determinacy claim. Certainly it is entrenched in our linguistic habits. I make a prediction. Things turn out as I predicted. And I say, “See, I *was* right.” More generally, the Determinacy claim is enshrined in the truth-value links—the network of principles that link the truth-conditions of utterances at different times of sentences that differ in their contents only in respect of tense. One such link precisely affirms that, for  $t_0$  earlier than  $t_1$ ,

‘P will be true at  $t_1$ ’ was true at  $t_0$  if and only if ‘P is true at  $t_1$ ’ is true at  $t_1$ .

However there are obvious concerns about the coherence of the combination of the Indeterminacy and Determinacy claims. The aristotelian says that a token utterance now, in 2007, of (*Peace*) is lacking in truth-value. And he agrees that one who in 2020 affirms, in some form of then appropriate words, the proposition it expresses will say something determinately true or false. So far there is no internal tension. But when he also agrees that it will be then be determinately true, or false, to say that the 2007—the present—utterance of (*Peace*) *was* determinately true or false when made, he appears to set up an antinomy. For he thereby allows that someone speaking then will be able correctly to describe the 2007 utterance as determinately true, or false, at the time of its making even though now—that is, at the time of its making!—it is correctly described neither as true nor false. It thus appears that the 2007 and 2020 assessments of the 2007 utterance of (*Peace*) are in simple contradiction, and that the aristotelian, in attempting to allow both claims—Determinacy and Indeterminacy—to stand, has committed himself to absurdity.<sup>16</sup>

How might truth-relativism help? Well, it may seem obvious. Once relativism is on the scene, a contradiction is aporetic only when each of its limbs is grounded in the same assessment-parameter. One who believes in the open future, the merchant of relativism may suggest, should accordingly view the truth of future-contingent utterances as assessment-sensitive, with *time of assessment* itself constituting the relevant assessment-contextual parameter. Once that step is taken, the tension between the two claims is apparently relieved. The assessments of the 2007 utterance of (*Peace*) made respectively in 2007 and in 2020 are indeed mutually inconsistent. But when truth is assessment-sensitive, that can just be a case of faultless disagreement.

We need, however, to take some care with this point. It is no good just venturing that a 2007 utterance of (*Peace*)—call it PM—can be untrue as assessed in 2007 but—let’s optimistically suppose—true as assessed in 2020. The proposal cannot be merely that utterances of (*Peace*) are assessment-sensitive, with time the relevant assessment-contextual parameter. That thought, by itself, is helpless to accommodate Determinacy. It allows that PM is untrue as assessed at 2007 and, let’s say, true, as assessed at 2020. And that seems to be exactly what is wanted for Indeterminacy. But a simple first-order relativism here does nothing to help with the idea that ‘PM is true at 2007’ *itself*

<sup>16</sup> Greenough, P., The Open Future (unpublished manuscript) terms this the Perspective Paradox and offers an examination in depth of two non-relativistic way of dealing with it.

receives differential evaluation at 2007 and at 2020. For that we need precisely to take the relativism up to second order. The truth-value not just of PM but also of an utterance of the first-order assessment, ‘ $T(\text{PM}, CA_{2007})$ ’, must both be time-of-assessment relative.

So the proposed relativist accommodation of the Indeterminacy and Determinacy claims must enter the territory of *multi-order relativism*—territory that is little explored and may well contain uncharted hazards. What we want to observe now is that, in sharp contrast to, for example, the situation with the (putative) assessment-relativity of expressions of judgements of taste, the proposed harmonisation of the two essential ingredients in the aristotelian view enforces more than multi-order relativism. It enforces trumping—more specifically, conservation of the Determinacy claim enforces inward trumping:

$$(\forall ca_1, ca_2)(T(U, ca_1) \supset T(T(U, ca_2)), ca_1)$$

Let’s think that through. The Indeterminacy claim has it that now—at 2007—we should assess PM as untrue; thus

$$(4) \quad \sim T(\text{PM}, CA_{2007})$$

But suppose again that by 2020 the Middle East has become a region of peace. Looking back, we will assess the 2007 prediction, PM, as correct both now (in 2020):

$$(5) \quad T(\text{PM}, CA_{2020})$$

and—by the Determinacy claim—at the time it was made:

$$(6) \quad T(T(\text{PM}, CA_{2007}), CA_{2020})$$

Indeed, the Determinacy claim, together with (5), enforces a similar verdict about how PM should be assessed in *any* assessment-context,  $ca_2$ :

$$(7) \quad (\forall ca_2)T(T(\text{PM}, ca_2), CA_{2020})$$

Moreover, this would apply not just to  $CA_{2020}$  but to any assessment-context  $ca_1$ , for which

$$(8) \quad T(\text{PM}, ca_1)$$

is correct. So we have a validation of inward trumping in full generality for PM:

$$(\forall ca_1)(\forall ca_2)(T(\text{PM}, ca_1) \supset T(T(\text{PM}, ca_2), ca_1))$$

and hence—since PM typifies any relevant example—of inward trumping in full generality for future contingents *tout court*. The Determinacy claim is exactly a thesis of cross-temporal inward trumping.

## 6 Aporia

It is a large question whether, if there were no further difficulty, this multi-order version of truth-relativism would indeed offer a satisfactory accommodation of the Determinacy and Indeterminacy components in an aristotelian view—or indeed whether any

satisfactory view *should* aim to accommodate them both.<sup>17</sup> We resolutely set aside such issues here. Our point is that there *is* a further difficulty. The difficulty is that given certain other special features of the situation, trumping is inconsistent with the ability of the relativist to attest to his relativism.

To elaborate. In order to attest to his view, the relativist has to be able to advert to the possibility of witnesses—so, at the very least, he must not be constrained to regard as false, or unjustified, any candidate for being a witness that anyone might produce. The relevant kind of witness, recall, is a statement of the form,

(Witness)  $T(U, CA_1) \ \& \ \sim T(U, CA_2)$

where  $CA_1$  and  $CA_2$  are in the present case specific assessment-contexts of which one is earlier than the other. Clearly there is no chance of producing such a witness when both contexts respectively antedate or post-date the events that determine the truth-value of  $U$ . So we can take it—given the way we have formulated the witness statement—that  $CA_2$  antedates those events but  $CA_1$  does not.

Here is the first of the ‘special features’ referred to a moment ago. *The theorist herself has to occupy some assessment-context of the relevant kind.* In the parable of Paul and Barry, there is no particular reason why the relativist theorist herself should have *any* relevant standards of taste. Maybe she cannot taste wine at all. Her own situation may simply not deliver any value for the relevant assessment-contextual parameter. But not so with time. She has to be stationed in time—at least if we are speaking of a normal flesh-and-blood, human theorist. So she herself will be (perhaps unknowingly) invested in a particular assessment of  $U$ . Call this feature *immersion*. A truth-relativist proposal is immersive just in case the assessment-contextual parameters it relativises truth to are one’s for which the theorist’s own situation necessarily supplies values.<sup>18</sup>

Because the theorist is immersed, there are two cases:

**Case 1** The theorist is at or later than  $CA_1$ . Then if  $T(U, CA_1)$  is good, inward trumping will require her to allow that  $T(T(U, CA_2), CA_1)$ ; that is, that  $T(U, CA_2)$  holds good from her present assessment-context. So she cannot deny  $T(U, CA_2)$  and thus has no witness. *Mutatis mutandis*, if  $\neg U$  is good at  $CA_1$ .<sup>19</sup>

**Case 2** The theorist is at some  $CA_2$ , before  $CA_1$ , and  $\sim T(U, CA_2)$  is good. Here is the second of the ‘special features’ announced above. This is *partial blindness*. A truth-relativist proposal involves partial blindness just in case the assessment-contextual parameters it relativises truth to are such that from the standpoint of at least some of them, there is no knowing what is true, or false, from the standpoint of (some) others. By Indeterminacy, a thinker at the earlier of two assessment-contexts is partially blind—he is blind with respect to the assessments mandated by the later context of utterance which are not yet true or false but will be so by the time of the later context.

<sup>17</sup> Or even, again, whether the whole project of trying to stabilise the Open Future is not metaphysically entirely misguided. We are taking no stand. But see Zimmerman (2007) for a reminder of some very immediate, serious-seeming misgivings.

<sup>18</sup> Wright (forthcoming) calls discourses for which truth-relativism is immersive “fully committed”.

<sup>19</sup> We write ‘ $\neg U$ ’ to denote an utterance of the negation of the proposition expressed by  $U$  (Cf note 12).

This is the situation of the relativist theorist at  $CA_2$ . There is no knowing what will be the situation as assessed at  $CA_1$  and so the theorist is in no position to affirm  $T(U, CA_1)$ . So again, he has no witness of his relativism. QED

This may seem disarmingly simple. And there is indeed scope for a wriggle. Indeterminacy provides both  $\sim T(U, CA_2)$  and  $\sim T(\neg U, CA_2)$ . But setting aside irrelevant complications to do with vagueness, it may seem that it may still be known at  $CA_2$  that either  $U$ , or  $\neg U$ , will be true as assessed at  $CA_1$ . That is

$$(D) \quad T(U, CA_1) \vee T(\neg U, CA_1)$$

And if so, the theorist is in position to reason that the disjunction:

$$[\sim T(U, CA_2) \ \& \ T(U, CA_1)] \vee [\sim T(\neg U, CA_2) \ \& \ T(\neg U, CA_1)]$$

is true at  $CA_2$ , even if he cannot say which disjunct is good. There is, then, an *unidentified* witness. Isn't that good enough?

In fact, it is confused. Since  $U$  concerns events at the time of  $CA_1$ , ' $U$ ' and " $T(U, CA_1)$ " are equivalent. Likewise, ' $\neg U$ ' and " $T(\neg U, CA_1)$ ". So the theorist is actually in no position at  $CA_2$  to endorse (D) unless he is then in position to endorse the simple instance of the law of excluded middle,

$$UV \neg U$$

How is that consistent with Indeterminacy?

It may be replied that the theorist may be proposing some supervaluational or other treatment of disjunction that would allow endorsement of the law of excluded middle to be consistent with rejection of the determinate truth of either disjunct.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, however, the same must then go the supposed disjunction of witnesses,

$$(DW) \quad [\sim T(U, CA_2) \ \& \ T(U, CA_1)] \vee [\sim T(\neg U, CA_2) \ \& \ T(\neg U, CA_1)]$$

with the result that it may be accepted in a particular context of assessment without commitment to either disjunct in particular being true at that context. But it is only if one in particular *is* true that we have an unidentified witness.

Here is another way of bringing out the confusion. The existence of an unidentified witness is supposed to be affirmed from the standpoint of  $CA_2$ . So what is wanted is that one of the disjuncts of (DW) is true at  $CA_2$ , even if there is no saying which. But the premise for the argument is that (D) is true at  $CA_2$ , i.e.,

$$T((T(U, CA_1) \vee T(\neg U, CA_1)), CA_2),$$

in which truth at  $CA_2$  is undistributed across the disjuncts of (D). It is only after it is distributed that we have something suitable to serve as the premise of an inference to (DW). But so to distribute it would be in flat contradiction of Indeterminacy.

<sup>20</sup> Thus Thomason (1970) and MacFarlane (forthcoming).

## 7 Another example?

It is not of course simply the involvement of second-order relativism that makes for the difficulty. In fact second-order relativism is involved only epiphenomenally, as it were, as a consequence of the mix of first-order relativism and inward trumping. And that mix too is, by itself, insufficient to underwrite an attestability problem (at least it is so for all that we have shown.) The crucial additional features are immersion, partial blindness and one more: that in the particular case, any witness to first-order relativism has to straddle, so to speak, a pair of assessment contexts *one of which trumps the other while the other is blind to the first*. The last point is crucial: if the trumped assessment-context were not blind to the trumping assessment-context, there would be no general obstacle to the production of a witness from within the former.

So it may seem to be a rather *outré* brew of ingredients that's needed to make the trouble. It therefore merits observation that there is at least one other discourse singled out for relativistic treatment in the modern debate which—so long as its principal proponent is right about one important aspect—would also appear to trigger the mix. This is discourse of epistemic modality—specifically, of epistemic possibility. John MacFarlane has famously suggested that an assessment-relativist conception of the truth-conditions of claims of the form:

It might be that P,

where the “might” is understood as referring to what is consonant with some body of information, rather than to any form of ontological (metaphysical) possibility, makes sense of a variety of linguistic data that otherwise appear anomalous and cannot, in particular, easily be explained by any contextualist or ‘invariantist’ account.<sup>21</sup>

The leading idea is that an utterance of “It might be that P” expresses a truth, or a falsehood, according to whether P is or is not consonant with the information possessed not by the speaker, or some utterance-contextually determined circle, but by an assessor of the utterance. One and the same such utterance can be true for one assessor and false for another, depending on variation in their respective collateral knowledge. That much is the basic, first-order relativism about the case. What about blindness? Well, whenever  $CA_1$  and  $CA_2$  are such that one incorporates more knowledge than the other, an occupant of the inferior will not know all that is known by the superior, so will not be able to assess what is epistemically possible as determined by the latter. As for immersion, the theorist is of course bound to be immersed, since she will have her own body of knowledge mandating a view about the epistemic possibility, or otherwise, of any particular targeted claim.

Now, if blindness is not to block the knowledgeable citation of a witness, the theorist has to know everything known in either of the two assessment-contexts that the witness mentions. And as far as the target utterance is concerned, he will therefore be constrained to agree with the assessment of the more knowledgeable of the two.<sup>22</sup> So

<sup>21</sup> MacFarlane (2003) unpublished and [forthcoming b]. The proposal has been widely discussed. An assessment of some of the issues is offered in Wright (2007).

<sup>22</sup> More specifically, suppose  $CA_1$  and  $CA_2$  are the two contexts, respectively inferior and superior, concerned. It cannot have been that the latter reinstates a possibility claim that the former discounts, since

the crux is simple inward trumping: if inward trumping holds, the theorist will not only affirm the opposite of the assessment of U—say that mandated in  $CA_1$ —with which he disagrees: he will affirm that the  $CA_1$ -assessment of U is not true in its original context of assessment,  $CA_1$ . But then he has contradicted one component in his prospective witness.

So everything hangs on this: if one is relativist about epistemic possibility claims, why should—or why might—one think that inward trumping holds? Well, there is a case for thinking so on the basis of the very linguistic ‘data’ that MacFarlane regards as impelling us towards relativism about epistemic modals. Here is a version of what has become a stock example, original to his unpublished (2003)<sup>23</sup>:

t<sub>1</sub> Sue: “Bill could be in Boston”

Ted: “Actually, I just saw him board a flight to Houston”

t<sub>2</sub> Sue: “Oh. Then I was wrong”.

MacFarlane, in that discussion and later, finds this an entirely plausible piece of dialogue, and he thinks we should take Sue’s t<sub>2</sub> utterance very seriously, as an intended *retrospective retraction*. She is saying that what she said was mistaken when she said it. Thus interpreted, Sue’s t<sub>2</sub> utterance contrasts with what she would be doing if, after Ted’s observation, she were merely to affirm:

t<sub>2</sub><sup>\*</sup> “Then that’s wrong – he can’t be in Boston”,

in which the rider suggests that what she now wants to distance herself from is merely the claim that *would* be made by a present—t<sub>2</sub>—affirmation of a token of her t<sub>1</sub>-utterance type. No doubt Sue is doing that in the original scenario as well. But in MacFarlane’s view she is there properly understood as doing more. For it would, in his view, be “odd and unnatural” if Sue were to continue,

t<sub>2</sub><sup>\*</sup>(continued) “—although when I said, “Bill might be in Boston,” what I said was true, and I stand by that claim.”

MacFarlane comments,

... it seems to me that th[is] alternative continuation, on which [a speaker] stands by her original claim, *always* sounds wrong. We simply don’t have the practice of standing by old claims of epistemic possibility in the face of new knowledge. We *could have* had this practice, but as things are, we just don’t talk this way.<sup>24</sup>

The point is crucial for MacFarlane because it blocks the assimilation of the case to one in which there is a context-of-use determined change of content. If Sue’s “odd and unnatural” continuation would in fact be perfectly acceptable normal practice, then the obvious construal to place upon her original self-correction would be *contextualist*—that she had no quarrel with what she had said (that is, with the content affirmed)

Footnote 22 continued

anything inconsistent with the former must be inconsistent with the latter too. So  $CA_2$  must discount a possibility claim which  $CA_1$  affirms. But in that case the theorist’s context,  $CA_3$ , must share  $CA_2$ ’s assessment, since it incorporates all  $CA_2$ ’s knowledge.

<sup>23</sup> The example and discussion are repeated in all essentials in MacFarlane (forthcoming b).

<sup>24</sup> MacFarlane (2003) unpublished, ts. p. 4.

before but only with what a token of the very same sentence-type would affirm at  $t_2$ . Whereas if Sue's correction is taken as MacFarlane seems to want to suggest, as implying that what she said was wrong in the original context in which she said it, then—given that the content in question is, in his view, the same—the correction is tantamount to an act of trumping.

Note that here is no space for the intermediate interpretation, so to speak, that while, pace contextualism, the content in question is the same, Sue's apparently retrospective correction is retrospective only with respect to the saying, as it were; i.e., that it is tantamount to "What I said back then *is* wrong". If that were the right account, there would be no obstacle to the addition, "though it was correct in the context in which I said it"—exactly the practice that MacFarlane is anxious to insist we just don't have. So it seems we should conclude that if the illustrated pattern of correction *is* indeed our standard practice, to be respected by any good theoretical account, then any such good account will incorporate trumping. Accordingly—in the light of the other circumstances noted—it will not be an attestable relativist account.

A qualification is needed. We remarked at the end of Sect. 1 that, with one exception, our focus would be on the relativist's dyadic metalinguistic truth predicate, rather than on the behaviour of "true" and its cognates within an object language for which an assessment-relativist semantics is proposed. The exception is the present issue: how the pattern of correction illustrated by Sue's "I was wrong" needs to be interpreted if it is to support MacFarlane's proposal. Since it employs no overtly metalinguistic truth-predicate, or cognate of such, it cannot be said that the pattern of correction in question is one of explicit trumping. The question is whether it is best construed as carrying a content which would naturally be expressed in a way tantamount to an act of explicit trumping *if* the necessary metalinguistic resources were available. The point is then that if MacFarlane is right that contextualism cannot handle the datum, and if, as seems clear, the intermediate interpretation just canvassed will not marry with a practice of not 'standing by old claims of epistemic possibility in the light of new knowledge', there is no other salient construal.

So the dilemma, in brief is this: if MacFarlane is wrong about either the reality or the interpretation of the pattern of correction illustrated, the relativist proposal is unmotivated by it; but if he is right, inward trumping is mandated for epistemic possibility claims just as soon as the appropriate metalinguistic resources are available, and—in circumstances that satisfy the other conditions in the "outré brew"—the proposed relativism is then not attestable.

## 8 The determinacy claim again

There is a further, connected issue about aristotelian relativism and the Determinacy claim which is worth noting. We said little to uncover any very deep motivation for the latter, referring merely to its entrenchment in our linguistic practice. So, at least as far as the present discussion is concerned, it is entirely open that the Determinacy claim *as we have understood it* is something that the proponent of the open future should simply jettison. One thought tending in that direction reflects that it is not clear what the truth-predicate is that features in the relevant entrenched aspects of our practice.



We explained at the outset that our argument was concerned with the metalinguistic, dyadic truth-predicate on utterances. But is that the right predicate in terms of which to try to articulate the linguistic intuitions, or habits, that suggest the Determinacy claim?

One might, on reflection, think not. An area of discourse for which utterance-truth was assessment-sensitive would be likely in any case to feature a regular object-language truth-operator on (apparent) propositional contents, “it is true that...”, for which no significant tense need be defined, and whose application would accordingly be timeless.<sup>25</sup> Is it so clear that it is not its interpretation in terms of such an operator that makes the Determinacy claim seem nigh on platitudinous? What stands in the way of interpreting my “See, I was right”, applied to an earlier prediction, as an expression to the effect that what I said—the proposition I affirmed—is timelessly true in this metaphysically lightweight sense? And what blocks the corresponding interpretation of the truth-value link earlier cited:

‘P will be true at  $t_1$ ’ was true at  $t_0$  if and only if ‘P is true at  $t_1$ ’ is true at  $t_1$ ,

as merely identifying the conditions of metaphysically light-weight, timeless truth of the proposition expressed by an utterance of ‘P will be true at  $t_1$ ’ at  $t_0$  with those of the proposition expressed by an utterance of ‘P is true at  $t_1$ ’ at  $t_1$ ?

The question is pointed. Here we merely observe that if this is indeed the right way to, so to say, neutralise the sting of the Determinacy claim—so that the retrospective affirmations of truth sanctioned by Determinacy no longer stand in any conflict with the putative indeterminacy of future contingent utterances—then it also provides a splendid way to deconstruct the Indeterminacy claim as a proper expression of the belief in the open future in the first place. The Indeterminacy claim is to the effect that future contingent utterances carry no truth-values, and that to think otherwise is perforce to allow the character of the future to be settled before it comes to be. The reply can now be, to the contrary, that to concede truth-value to future contingent utterances need be no more than to concede metaphysically lightweight, timeless truth-values to the propositions they express: truth-values whose possession, understood in the terms proposed in order to defang the Determinacy claim, is nothing that implies anything about date of settlement. So Indeterminacy is defanged too. The belief that the future is open, whatever exactly it may now amount to, will be nothing to motivate a denial of truth-value to future contingents. So there will be no phenomenon of variability in truth-value for a relativist proposal to assist in stabilising.

## 9 Unattestable but respectable relativism?

(*Rel*), the canonical form of the relativistic thesis for a discourse, is an existential claim. There are constructivistically minded philosophers who would argue that any justification to regard an existential claim as true is abrogated by a demonstration that no witness to it can justifiably be taken as true. We have some sympathy for some

<sup>25</sup> See Sect. 8 of MacFarlane (forthcoming) for a semantics for such a propositional operator for the very case of tensed discourse.

suitably qualified version of that claim.<sup>26</sup> But even if it is repudiated, there are still very awkward consequences for the would-be proponent of an unattestable relativism. One is that the relativistic apparatus is straight away precluded from the substantiation of any faultless disagreement claim, since to identify a specific type of disagreement as faultless will precisely be to attest to the relevant relativism. Another is to put great pressure on the question of *evidence* for adopting a relativistic account of the discourse in question in the first place. What could such evidence be in the presence of a proof that no witness to the relevant instance of (*Rel*) could rationally be affirmed by any participant in the discourse? It is true that the linguistic ‘data’ cited by relativists are in general much more indirect than would be provided simply by speakers’ making witness claims—and, as we have in effect already reflected, that is as it had better be since speakers need not in general have the resource of a metalinguistic relative truth—predicate in terms of which to formulate such claims. But the putative linguistic evidence ought at least, surely, to suggest that such claims *would* be endorsed, once speakers are provided with the means to express them. Yet where relativism is unattestable, the evidence cannot possibly have that character. How might it manage to bear on the appropriate instance of (*Rel*) nevertheless?

Another conceivable direction<sup>27</sup> would be for the theorist to attempt to argue that the additional features that lead to unattestability might fail for certain kinds of conceivable but non-actual thinkers. This thought might be developed in either of two directions. If a hypothetical theorist could consider our discourse of future contingencies from a standpoint outside our time, for example,—that is, from an *unimmersed* vantage-point,—then perhaps he might be free to affirm instances of each of the conjuncts of a witness to (*Rel*) for future contingents as uttered by us. Conversely, we might cast ourselves in the role of theorists concerning the discourse involving future contingents of hypothetical speakers who again occupied an incommensurable time, and seek to argue that, in view of other similarities between their hypothetical discourse and our actual one, the possibility of affirmable witnesses, from our perspective, to a relativistic account of their discourse would allow whatever independent reasons there might be to offer an assessment-relativist account of it to transfer to such a view of ours, even though the view would be unattestable by us actual speakers.

We mention these ideas only to show we are aware of them. For the aristotelian case, they depend on the difficult idea that an assessment of the truth-values of future contingents from a situation incommensurable to ours in time—a temporally unimmersed situation—is intelligible; more specifically that a form of assessment context is conceivable which, while, ratifying a conjunction of the form, ‘ $\sim T(U, CA_2) \& T(U, CA_1)$ ’ for  $CA_2$  and  $CA_1$  constituted by stations in a particular time, itself involved no station in that time and delivered no assessment of  $U$ . And for the case of epistemic possibility,

<sup>26</sup> Note, by the way, that it needs no qualification in the light of Preface Paradox—type examples. These are cases where an existential is reasonably believed even though each of its instances is reasonably doubted: there is no suggestion that none of them *can* be reasonably believed but only that, in the evidential context in question, they are not. In such cases, one reasonably believes that a witness can, by some appropriate procedure, be found, and the challenge is to explain why this belief is not defeated by one’s justified confidence in the falsity of each of the possible witnesses. This is not the predicament of the exponents of unattestable relativisms.

<sup>27</sup> Pressed in seminar discussion by Herman Cappelen and Elia Zardini.

they clearly go nowhere since the idea of an assessor, even a counterfactual assessor, who has no particular state of knowledge, is incoherent.

## 10 Concluding remarks

Attestability problems are just one potential hazard for unwary relativists. What we have offered is merely a specimen investigation of one within a conspectus of questions that have tended to be displaced by the modern debate which, largely content with the notion that contemporary truth-relativism is an interesting but, from the point of view of semantic theory, essentially modest twist to the supposedly straightforward Lewisian precedent, has been mostly focused on marshalling and evaluating linguistic ‘data’, for and against, in different regions of discourse. This is unfortunate. For one thing, there are very deep-reaching issues in the philosophy of language about just how straightforward the Lewisian precedent really is, and about how modest the “twist”.<sup>28</sup> But in any case we should also still aspire to engage the underlying issues about philosophical status, coherence, and possible generalisation with which critics have badgered relativism ever since its Protagorean gestation and which still bear on its modern incarnations. We still need to know, for example, which are the coherent multi-order combinations of relativisms and absolutisms, what is the proper statement of the traditional benefit of even-handedness, and what are the conditions for its deliverability, what is the impact on the stability and benefits of relativist approaches in particular localities of variable phenomena like immersion, blindness, and perhaps others yet undisclosed; and what impact on all of this is carried by the issue whether philosophy itself should be seen as an assessment-sensitive domain.<sup>29</sup> The present climate is indeed one in which it may be easier than before to get this range of questions into focus and debate them effectively. But the debate is, for the most part, barely engaged.<sup>30</sup>

## Appendix

### Interdependencies of orders of absolutism (and relativism)

Where  $U$  ranges over the utterances of a discourse,  $D$ , for which truth-relativism has been proposed, a *first-order assessment* is any statement of either of the forms,  $T(U, CA_k)$ , or  $\sim T(U, CA_k)$ ; a *second-order assessment* is any statement of either of those forms in which the occurrence of ‘ $U$ ’ is replaced by the name of a first order assessment; and an  *$n$ th-order assessment* is any statement of either of those forms in which the occurrence of ‘ $U$ ’ is replaced by the name of an  $(n - 1)$ th-order assessment.

<sup>28</sup> For exploration, see Cappelen and Hawthorne (forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> See Hales (2006).

<sup>30</sup> We are grateful to the members of the Arché *Contextualism and Relativism* project seminar for very helpful discussion of an earlier draft. Thanks also to Giorgio Volpe and Giuliano Torrengo. Especial thanks to Elia Zardini and Roberto Loss.

*First-order absolutism* about D is the view that the only contextually variable features contributing towards determination of the truth-conditions of its utterances are features of their contexts of *use*. Utterances with this property will be termed, correspondingly, *first-order absolute*. Thus for such utterances U, this principle will hold:

(First-order absolutism)  $(\forall ca_1, ca_2)(T(U, ca_1) \equiv T(U, ca_2))$

First-order absolutism about D holds that no variation in parameters of assessment makes a difference to the truth-conditions of its utterances. Assessment-contexts are idle wheels in the determination of the truth-value of utterances in the range of U.

There is, obviously, an analogous second-order doctrine about the absoluteness of the truth-values of first-order assessments of utterances of D. *Second-order absolutism* amounts to the idea that once a value for a parameter of assessment of an utterance U of D is fixed, the result—the truth-value which U takes for that value—is *itself* absolute: there is no further assessment-relativity attending its determination. If that is granted, this principle will hold:

(Second-order absolutism)  $(\forall ca_1, ca_2, ca_3)T(T(U, ca_1), ca_2) \equiv T(T(U, ca_1), ca_3)$

By contrast *second-order relativism* for a class of utterances is the thesis there are first-order assessments of members of that class that are themselves assessment-sensitive: two second-order assessments can correctly evaluate the same first-order assessment in different ways. We now prove four theses.

### *Thesis (I)*

(On a natural assumption) *First-order absolutism entails second-order absolutism*.

Here is a proof by classical *reductio*. Assume first-order absolutism:

(1)  $(\forall ca_1, ca_2)(T(U, ca_1) \equiv T(U, ca_2))$

Assume for *reductio* that second-order absolutism fails for U:

(2)  $(\exists ca_1, ca_2, ca_3)(T(T(U, ca_1), ca_2) \& \sim T(T(U, ca_1), ca_3))$

Let  $CA_1$ ,  $CA_2$  and  $CA_3$  witness of the truth of (2):

(3)  $(T(T(U, CA_1), CA_2) \& \sim T(T(U, CA_1), CA_3))$

The “natural assumption” referred to is that, if first-order absolutism holds for U, it holds as an absolute, theoretical truth. Hence it should hold irrespective of any context of assessment in which it is considered:

(4)  $(\forall ca_k, ca_m, ca_n)(T(T(U, ca_m) \equiv T(U, ca_n)), ca_k)$

From this, taking  $CA_1$  for ‘ $ca_m$ ’ and  $CA_2$  for ‘ $ca_n$ ’ and ‘ $ca_k$ ’, we get

(5)  $T(T(T(U, CA_1) \equiv T(U, CA_2)), CA_2)$

whence, distributing the context of assessment across the enclosed biconditional,<sup>31</sup> we obtain

<sup>31</sup> If a biconditional holds in a context of assessment, and so does one of its limbs, then so too does the other.

$$(6) \quad T(T(U, CA_1), CA_2) \equiv T(T(U, CA_2), CA_2)$$

From (6) applying the first conjunct of (3), a *modus ponens* across the biconditional yields

$$(7) \quad T(T(U, CA_2), CA_2)$$

By analogous steps, taking  $CA_1$  for ' $ca_m$ ' and  $CA_3$  for ' $ca_n$ ' and ' $ca_k$ ' in (4), we obtain

$$(8) \quad (T(T(U, CA_1), CA_3) \equiv T(T(U, CA_3), CA_3))$$

From (8) applying the second conjunct of (3), a *modus tollens* across the biconditional yields

$$(9) \quad \sim T(T(U, CA_3), CA_3)$$

By the quasi-disquotational principle, (8) and (9) entail

$$(10) \quad T(U, CA_2) \& \sim T(U, CA_3),$$

contradicting assumption (1), of first-order absolutism.

Evidently this reasoning manifests a template that is (classically) good when  $U$  is a statement of any kind. In particular, it is good if  $U$  is itself an  $n$ th-order assessment of some other utterance. So we have the generalised result that  $n$ th-order absolutism entails  $n+1$ th order absolutism.

We do not, of course, expect the converse entailment, from second-to first-order absolutism, or more generally from  $n$ th to  $n-1$ th-order absolutism, without qualification. It is, for instance, quite consistent with first-order relativism about matters of taste to hold that truths about which opinions are sanctioned by which standards of taste are themselves absolute. That the proposition that Sassicaia is better than Barolo is true as assessed by Paul's standards, but not as assessed by Barry's, may be an absolute truth, invariant under change not just in standards of taste but any assessment-contextual parameters.

However, although second-order absolutism does not itself enjoin first-order absolutism, it does so if *inward* trumping also holds. In fact, inward trumping precludes the combination of regular (first-order) relativism and second-order absolutism.

## Thesis (II)

### Second-order Absolutism and trumping entail First-Order Absolutism

This is very straightforward to see. Suppose that second-order absolutism and inward trumping hold for an utterance  $U$ :

$$(1) \quad (\forall ca_1, ca_2, ca_3) T(T(U, ca_1), ca_2) \equiv T(T(U, ca_1), ca_3) \quad (\text{Second-order Absolutism})$$

$$(2) \quad (\forall ca_1, ca_2) (T(U, ca_1) \supset T(T(U, ca_2), ca_1)) \quad (\text{Inward trumping})$$

and assume for *reductio* that first-order relativism holds for  $U$ :

$$(3) \quad (\exists ca_1, ca_2) (T(U, ca_1) \& \sim T(U, ca_2)) \quad (\text{First-order relativism})$$

Let  $CA_1$  and  $CA_2$  be two contexts of assessment which witness the truth of (3), specifically, suppose that the utterance  $U$  is true relative to the context of assessment  $CA_1$  and untrue relative to the context of assessment  $CA_2$ :

$$(4) \quad (T(U, CA_1) \& \sim T(U, CA_2))$$

By the quasi-disquotational principle, the second conjunct of (4) yields

$$(5) \quad \sim T(T(U, CA_2), CA_2)$$

As an instance of (1), taking  $CA_1$  for ' $ca_3$ ' and  $CA_2$  for ' $ca_1$ ' and ' $ca_2$ ', we obtain:

$$(6) \quad T(T(U, CA_2), CA_2) \equiv T(T(U, CA_2), CA_1)$$

And from (5) and (6) by contraposition we get

$$(7) \quad \sim T(T(U, CA_2), CA_1)$$

But now from (2), taking  $CA_1$  and  $CA_2$  for ' $ca_1$ ' and ' $ca_2$ ' respectively, together with the first conjunct of (4), we obtain

$$(8) \quad T(T(U, CA_2), CA_1),$$

which contradicts (7).

Since first-order absolutism entails second-order absolutism, first-and second-order absolutism must hold together if inward trumping holds. So—as noted in the main text—if there is a case for first-order relativism about a certain area of discourse and if in that area of discourse inward trumping holds, second-order relativism is enforced for that area too.

Second-order absolutism also entails first-order absolutism if *outward* trumping holds. Again, the proof is very immediate. Suppose that second-order absolutism and outward trumping hold for an utterance U:

$$(1) \quad (\forall ca_1, ca_2, ca_3) T(T(U, ca_1), ca_2) \equiv T(T(U, ca_1), ca_3) \quad (\text{Second-order Absolutism})$$

$$(2) \quad (\forall ca_1, ca_2) (T(T(U, ca_2), ca_1) \supset T(U, ca_1)) \quad (\text{Outward trumping})$$

and assume for *reductio* that first-order relativism holds for U:

$$(3) \quad (\exists ca_1, ca_2) (T(U, ca_1) \& \sim T(U, ca_2)) \quad (\text{First-order relativism})$$

Let  $CA_1$  and  $CA_2$  be two contexts of assessment which witness the truth of (3); specifically, suppose that the utterance U is true relative to the context of assessment  $CA_1$  and untrue relative to the context of assessment  $CA_2$ :

$$(4) \quad (T(U, CA_1) \& \sim T(U, CA_2))$$

As an instance of (1), taking  $CA_2$  for ' $ca_3$ ' and  $CA_1$  for ' $ca_1$ ' and ' $ca_2$ ', we obtain:

$$(5) \quad T(T(U, CA_1), CA_1) \equiv T(T(U, CA_1), CA_2)$$

Taking ' $CA_2$ ' for ' $ca_1$ ' in and ' $CA_1$ ' for ' $ca_2$ ' in (2), we have

$$(6) \quad (T(T(U, CA_1), CA_2) \supset T(U, CA_2))$$

The second conjunct of (4) together with (6) then yield by contraposition

$$(7) \quad \sim (T(T(U, CA_1), CA_2))$$

which by (5) and a further contraposition yields

$$(8) \quad \sim T(T(U, CA_1), CA_1)$$

By the quasi-disquotational principle, (8) yields

$$(9) \quad \sim T(U, CA_1)$$

which contradicts with the first conjunct of (4). It follows that in the presence of outward trumping, first-order relativism for a certain area of discourse is a commitment to second-order relativism as well.

In general: if either form of trumping holds,  $n$ th- and  $n + 1$ th-order absolutism collapse into each other, and so do  $n$ th- and  $n + 1$ th-order relativism.

Let Absolute Absolutism for a discourse  $D$  be the view that all its basic statements and every  $n$ th-order assessment of them are absolute. Let the extended discourse of  $D$ ,  $D^*$ , include  $D$  and all  $n$ th-order assessments of statements of  $D$ . Then:

### *Thesis (III)*

*Absolute Absolutism for a discourse  $D$  entails that both inward and outward trumping hold unrestrictedly within  $D^*$ .*

Both cases are very immediate. First, inward trumping. Let  $U$  be any statement of  $D^*$ . Assume the antecedent of inward trumping holds for  $U$  and an arbitrary context of assessment  $CA_1$ :

$$(1) \quad T(U, CA_1)$$

By the quasi-disquotational principle, we have that

$$(2) \quad T(T(U, CA_1), CA_1)$$

Since by absolute absolutism, any arbitrary assessment-context,  $CA_2$ , agrees with  $CA_1$  in the assessment of  $T(U, CA_1)$ , we have that

$$(3) \quad T(T(U, CA_1), CA_2)$$

Steps of Conditional Proof and Universal Generalisation then yield inward trumping.

Now, assume the antecedent of outward trumping:

$$(4) \quad T(T(U, CA_1), CA_2)$$

Since absolute absolutism holds, we have that since all contexts of assessment agree in the evaluation of  $T(U, CA_1)$ ,  $CA_1$  will agree with  $CA_2$ :

$$(5) \quad T(T(U, CA_1), CA_1)$$

The quasi-disquotational principle then yields the consequent of outward trumping,

$$(6) \quad T(U, CA_1)$$

with steps of conditional proof and generalisation to follow.

## References

- Cappelen, H., & Hawthorne, J. (forthcoming). *Relativism: An essay in foundational semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hales, S. (2006). *Relativism and the foundations of philosophy*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Kölbel, M. (2003). Faultless disagreement. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 104, 53–73.
- Lewis, D. (1980). Index, context, and content. In S. Kanger & S. Ohman (Eds.), *Philosophy and grammar* (pp. 79–100). Reprinted in his papers in *Philosophical logic* (pp. 21–44). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Lukasiewicz, J. (1970). On determinism. In L. Borkowski (Ed.), *Selected works*. Amsterdam: North Holland.
- MacFarlane, J. (2003). Future contingents and relative truth. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 53, 321–336.
- MacFarlane, J. (2005a). The assessment sensitivity of knowledge attributions. In T. Szabó Gendler & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Oxford studies in epistemology* (vol. 1, pp. 197–223). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacFarlane, J. (2005b). Making sense of relative truth. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105, 321–339.
- MacFarlane, J. (2007). Relativism and disagreement. *Philosophical Studies*, 132, 17–31.
- MacFarlane, J. (forthcoming a). Truth in the garden of forking paths. In M. Kölbel & M. García-Carpintero (Eds.), *Relative truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacFarlane, J. (forthcoming b). In B. Weatherson & A. Egan (Eds.), *Epistemic modals are assessment-sensitive*. Oxford University Press (to appear).
- MacFarlane, J. (2003). Epistemic modalities and relative truth. MS available at <http://sophos.berkeley.edu/macfarlane/epistmod.pdf> (unpublished).
- Thomason, R. H. (1970). Indeterministic time and truth-value gaps. *Theoria*, 36, 264–281.
- Wright, C. (2006). Intuitionism, realism, relativism and rhubarb. In P. Greenough & M. P. Lynch (Eds.), *Truth and realism* (pp. 77–99). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, C. (2007). New age relativism and epistemic possibility. In E. Sosa & E. Villanueva (Eds.), *Philosophical Issues 17*, special number on *The metaphysics of epistemology* (pp. 262–283).
- Wright, C. (forthcoming). Relativism about truth itself: haphazard thoughts about the very idea. In M. García-Carpintero & M. Kölbel (Eds.), *Relativizing truth*. OUP.
- Zimmerman, A. (2007). Against relativism. *Philosophical Studies*, 133, 313–348.