Relativism and the Norm of Truth

Maria Baghramian
University College Dublin

Richard Hamilton
Trinity College Dublin

Abstract: In diversi contributi John MacFarlane ha sostenuto che certe classi di asserzioni devono essere considerate vere relativamente a un contesto di valutazione (*context of assessment*) e false relativamente a un altro contesto di valutazione. Secondo Gareth Evans, tuttavia, si può affermare che se la verità di una proposizione diviene relativa, allora cessa di funzionare come *norma dell'asserzione*, in quanto non fornisce più una meta o un'intenzione stabile per le asserzioni. La risposta di MacFarlane consiste nel negare che l'orientamento alla verità sia una caratteristica necessaria per tutte le asserzioni. Questo saggio argomenta che MacFarlane non raccoglie la sfida correttamente lanciata da Evans, e ciò per due motivi: 1) non riesce a rendere conto delle norme di un'asserzione che non presupponga la norma della verità; 2) la sua spiegazione delle norme dell'asserzione rimane esposta a obiezioni del genere di quelle di Evans.
Keywords: relativismo, verità, John MacFarlane, Gareth Evans, norme, assserzioni.

Arguments for relativism about truth, or alethic relativism, are almost as old as philosophy itself — and so are attempts to refute it. Yet, the doctrine remains as seductive today as it was for Protagoras. Recent developments in philosophy of language have revitalised this ancient topic by giving it a new, specifically semantic, dimension.

New relativism about truth, also sometimes known as truth–relativism, was first articulated by David Lewis (Lewis 1979) who argued for a relativistic account of first–person beliefs. According to Lewis, beliefs which are expressed by using the first person pronouns 'I' and 'me' and such like, or as Lewis calls them 'de se beliefs', can be true relative to one of its possessors and false relative to another within a single possible world. The Lewisian idea has been developed further by John MacFarlane, who in a large number of papers has argued that certain classes of assertions, for instance assertions

about taste, knowledge or the future can be treated as true relative to one «context of assessment» and false relative to another.

According to MacFarlane's influential formulation, the truth of sentences or assertions is relative not just to contexts of use but also to *contexts of assessment*. This sort of relativism is seen as useful for explaining away what has become known, after Max Kölbel, as instances of faultless disagreement. Faultless disagreement arises in situations where given a thinker A, a thinker B, and a proposition (or content of judgement) p we face the scenario:

(a) A believes (judges) p and B believes (judges) not p,
(b) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault) (Kölbel 2004).

Kölbel argues that two people disagree with each other on any occasion when one of them asserts p and the other denies it (or asserts p). But if neither party has made a mistake in her assertions then, we have to say that both party is correct and therefore both their beliefs p and p must be true. The truth–relativists' way to deal with this scenario is to say that each belief is true relative to a perspective or context of assessment.

There has been a plethora of criticism of the idea of relativism about truth, ranging from the famous self–refutation argument, first formulated by Plato, to more detailed considerations regarding the formal semantic machinery needed to make sense of the proposal. This paper will focus solely on one argument against truth–relativism: the argument from the normative role of truth. Briefly stated we maintain:

The distinction between correct and incorrect, and hence true and false, instances of assertion is a necessary condition for coherent asserting. This point is expressed by the claim that assertions are truth–directed, they aim at truth. However, if truth is relative, then there is no single definite target for any given assertion and therefore no way to make sense of assertions.

Truth and Normativity: Some Preliminaries

That truth, justification and belief itself have normative dimensions is a philosophical common place. Even the arch–naturalist Quine eventually conceded that the project of naturalised epistemology does not amount to jettisoning all traces of normativity and settling only for the indiscriminate descriptions of our cognitive and epistemic episodes and processes. For him the «normative is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth seeking», where truth is the terminal parameter of the process of enquiry (Quine 1986: 664).

The normative character of truth can be characterized in at least two distinct ways. Norms may be seen as standards of behaviour shared by the members of a particular social group. In this sense, norms are generalizations from what is typical of a group or a community; they are descriptive of what is common to a given community of actors or believers. To say that truth, like justification and knowledge, are normative in this sociological sense is to allow for the possibility of alethic and epistemic relativism. For different social groups may share different standards of behaviour and hence subscribe to different norms. This is one possible reading of Wittgenstein's comments on rule–following and what it is to participate in a form of life — it is the reading that turns Wittgenstein into a relativist.

This interpretation of the normativity of truth is also implicit in Richard Rorty's view. Rorty denies that truth should be seen a goal of enquiry or that it should be given any substantive role in explanation. However, he argues that we use the predicate 'is true' for commending beliefs and that, at least in this sense, truth plays a normative role in our on–going 'conversations'. Truth is simply a compliment paid to sentences we cherish at a given time, just as knowledge is «a compliment paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed» (Rorty 1991: 24). The view facilitates relativism about truth because of the link it forges between truth and descriptions of community–wide epistemic practices, practices which can vary with time and place.

A second way of looking at norms is to see them as tools or means of evaluation where a normative judgment «pronounces something good or bad, right or wrong, proper or improper, and the like» (Goldman 1986: 20). In this prescriptive sense, to call truth normative is to say that it shows how and what we ought to believe as well as describing what we do believe. Most discussions of alethic normativity are conducted under this prescriptive rubric. And it is this particular sense of the normativity of truth that comes into conflict with relativism about truth in general and new relativism in particular.

Truth plays a normative role in assertoric speech acts because it acts as the aim or goal of an assertion. To put it slightly differently, something counts as an assertion, when uttered sincerely and with intent to inform, if it aims at truth. Truth then should be seen as constitutive of what counts as an assertion.

An explicit statement of this point was first made by Peirce who argued that assertions have an essentially normative ingredient: «This ingredient, the assuming of responsibility, which is so prominent in solemn assertion, must be present in every genuine assertion» (Peirce 1934: 386). Peirce's insight has been restated in a variety of ways, but the basic idea behind them all is that in asserting a proposition p, a sincere speaker who wishes to be informative

commits himself to its truth and takes responsibility for it. Philosophers following Peirce have seen truth–directedness as the paramount norm governing assertions[1]. Crispin Wright, for instance lists it as one of the platitudes about truth. According to him, to assert a proposition is to claim that it is true and this platitude is «partly constitutive» of the concepts of assertion and truth (Wright 1992: 23–24). Searle, along similar lines, argues, «asserting commits the speaker to the truth of the proposition asserted» (Searle 2001: 147). For Searle, the norm of truth is constitutive of assertion in the sense that principles such as 'you ought to tell the truth', 'you ought not to lie', or 'you ought to be consistent in your assertion' are internal to the notion of assertion. «You do not need any external moral principle to have the relevant commitments. The commitment to truth is built into the structure of the intentionality of the assertion» (Searle 2001: 181).

'True' and 'false' are used to evaluate beliefs as correct and incorrect. In other words, a true belief is also a correct belief, and false beliefs are incorrect. Correctness is a normative notion or concept. We commend people for having correct beliefs and condemn them for their false or incorrect beliefs, just as we commend and condemn their actions for being right or wrong. Truth then is intrinsically normative; it is a value, just as beauty and goodness are and furthermore it transcends the boundaries between epistemic and moral values, truth is simultaneously an epistemic and ethical virtue. As Bernard Williams puts it «the falsity of a belief is a terminal objection to holding it» and therefore speakers would be both morally and epistemically culpable if they did not adhere to the norm of truth telling and truth–seeking. Moreover, the imperative of truth–seeking is categorical — not contingent on wishes, desires or other mental states. If this is correct, then truth telling is a constitutive presupposition of intelligible discourse. For language to function at all, speakers have to abide by the norm of truth telling most of the time. Truthfulness, simultaneously, is a moral obligation presupposed by many other thick moral norms such as honesty, integrity, sincerity, etc.

In the remainder of this paper we defend the view that relativism about truth, in MacFarlane's version (MacFarlane 2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2007a; 2007b; 2008) violates the normative requirements of discourse. The criticism is not new, it was voiced by Gareth Evans in relation to tense logic (Evans 1996). According to Evans, once the truth of a proposition is made relative to some shiftable factor, then truth ceases to function as a *norm of assertion* because it

[1] Over the last few years several alternative accounts of the norms governing assertions have been developed. Tim Williamson, for instance, has put forward an influential position arguing that knowledge is the norm of assertion. Alternative positions include the sincerity norm, according to which one should not say what one does not believe and various versions of the rationality or justification norm, according to which one shouldn't say something in the absence of good reasons or justification.

no longer provides a stable goal or aim for assertions. MacFarlane's response is to deny that truth guidedness is a necessary feature of all assertions (MacFarlane 2003: 332). We will argue that MacFarlane fails to meet the challenge posed by Evans adequately.

MacFarlane's version of truth–relativism

Taking a broadly Kaplanian approach, MacFarlane relativises the truth of sentences and utterances to a variety of contexts. The following passage from *Relativism and Disagreement* gives a good flavour of his approach.

> The relativist might envision contents that are «sense–of–humor neutral» or «standard–of–taste neutral» or «epistemic–state neutral», and circumstances of evaluation that include parameters for a sense of humour, a standard of taste, or an epistemic state. This move would open up room for the truth–value of a proposition to vary with these «subjective» factors in much the same way that it varies with the world of evaluation. The very same proposition — say, that apples are delicious — could be true with respect to one standard of taste, false with respect to another (MacFarlane 2007a: 21–22).

As MacFarlane himself points out, in this approach, relativism in effect «amounts to recognising a new kind of linguistic context–sensitivity» (MacFarlane 2003: 332) where sentence–truth is doubly relativised, to a context of utterance and a context of assessment (MacFarlane 2003: 330).

One prominent and much discussed instance of this approach is MacFarlane's treatment of future contingents. Aristotle in *De Interpretatione* famously asked: «Do assertions concerning contingent events in the future have a truth value now?» The worry is how to reconcile the absolutist view of truth, which claims that every assertion is either true or false, with the metaphysical position that the future is genuinely open or contingent. In *Future Contingents and Relative Truth* John MacFarlane attempts to make sense of our talk and thought about the future while respecting the *branching worlds* picture of reality. Like Aristotle, MacFarlane is torn between two intuitions; moreover, he believes that such ambivalence is philosophically justified. The first intuition drives us to the conclusion that the future is genuinely (not just in an epistemic sense) open, i.e. it is genuinely indeterminate whether tomorrow a sea battle would take place or not [2]. The second intuition relies on a classical view of truth (and falsity) where truth

[2] The discussion of the sea battle is at *On Interpretation*, IX (Aristotle 1949).

is seen both as timeless and bivalent, so that if tomorrow it is true to say that 'there is a sea battle now', then today it should be true to say that 'there will be a sea battle tomorrow'.

MacFarlane motivates the indeterminacy intuition on semantic and not metaphysical or empirical grounds. He thinks that abandoning the belief that the future is genuinely indeterminate would jeopardise the coherence of our talk about future events. He writes:

> Whether the world is objectively indeterministic in this sense is, of course, a substantive scientific (and perhaps metaphysical) question. I do not here presuppose an affirmative answer to this question. All I am presupposing is that talk about the future would not be incoherent in an objectively indeterministic world. Determinism may be true, but it is not for the semanticist to say so (MacFarlane 2003: 323).

The motivation for indeterminacy could be made by using the figure below, representing branching histories, taken from MacFarlane 2003:

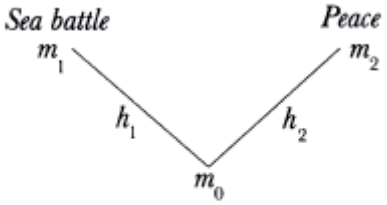

Figure 1: Branching histories

This is a picture of the future, given objective indeterminacy. Our intuition should be that the utterance at moment m_0 referring to an event at m_1 should be neither true nor false, since m_0 is on two objectively possible future histories, h_1 and h_2. On h_1 the utterance is true. On h_2 it is false. Thus the utterance at m_0 is neither true nor false.

The motivation for the opposite intuition is a very simple argument, made at m_1. Imagine an observer, watching the sea battle at m_1 saying:

Jake asserted yesterday that there would be a sea battle today

There is a sea battle today

So Jake's assertion was true (MacFarlane 2003: 325).

MacFarlane finds the reasoning «unimpeachable». But then our two intuitions lead us to the conclusion that the utterance at m_0 is neither true nor false and that it is simultaneously true.

If we assign only a single context to the utterance, when the context of utterance is m_0, the sentence «there will be a sea battle tomorrow» is true on

history 1 and false on history 2. If the context of utterance is m_1 however, the utterance turns out to be true. This contradiction is what MacFarlane aims to solve. He argues that if we introduce a second context, a context of assessment C_a as well as C_u, then instead of saying «sentence S is true at C_u», which generates our initial difficulty, we say, «sentence S is true at C_u, C_a». This means that the model of double contextuality yields the following result, which is exactly what MacFarlane is looking for:

At u = m_0 and a = m_0 s is neither true nor false (because we must look at both points, m_0/h_1 and m_0/h_2).

At u = m_0 and a = m_1, s is true (because we look only at m_0/h_1)

At u = m_0 and a = h_1, s is false (because we look only at m_0/h_2) (MacFarlane 2003: 332).

Introducing the second context then, gives us what we need to preserve both the indeterminacy and the determinacy intuitions. In this model, the very same assertion is neither true nor false the day before the battle, but true on the day of the battle, because the context of assessment is different, and thus provides the extra parameter needed to give us relativism. The guiding thought is: an adequate account of truth concerning future contingents, as in other cases, should respect and preserve our intuitions. According to MacFarlane, classical views of truth fail to do so, his account, which relativises the truth of utterances to a context of assessment can preserve both intuitions. Therefore, a detailed examination of conflicting intuitions about future contingents forces truth–relativism on us. The bonus is that truth–relativism can be used to «liberate» us from various conceptual bonds elsewhere. For instance, it can help us with problems arising from the assessment sensitivity of knowledge attributions (MacFarlane 2005a), faultless disagreement (MacFarlane 2007a), and epistemic modals (MacFarlane forthcoming). The payoff of solving all of these philosophical problems — «a small price to pay for an adequate account of future contingents» (MacFarlane 2003: 332) — is that we are forced to abandon «the absoluteness assumption», that is, «the orthodox assumption that truth for utterances is non–relative» (MacFarlane 2003: 322)[3]. But this cost, he maintains, is justified by the gains.

The Cost of Truth–Relativism

In his paper *Does Tense Logic Rest upon a Mistake?* (1996: 343) Evans introduces a challenge to tensed logic and more generally to the idea that

[3] On the absolutist model, once we fix various matters of context etc., we can reach the content of an utterance, whose truth value ought to be separate from contexts and circumstances.

time itself might be a context. The challenge, as MacFarlane notes, is broad enough to apply to truth–relativism and double contextuality. In MacFarlane's proposal the context of assessment introduces a second time–frame, the moment of assessment, to which the truth of an assertion is to be relativised. Evans had argued that such an attempt at relativisation is unintelligible for it cannot provide us with a general criterion of truth.

Evans' target is the tense–logic inaugurated by Arthur N. Prior, whose fundamental contention is that the past or future tense verb is 'out of the same box as' such terms as 'not', 'not the case that', and 'possible'. Thus for Prior, talking about 'truth at time t' is parallel to talking about 'truth with respect to possible world w'. He criticises the view that the «evaluation of an utterance as correct or incorrect depends upon the time the *evaluation* is made». Evans' particular target is the view that Geach attributes to the Stoics and Scholastics in his review of Benson Mates' *Stoic Logic*. The attributed view is that, an untensed proposition such as «Socrates is sitting» is a complete proposition, which is sometimes true and sometimes false, «not an incomplete expression requiring a further phrase like 'at time t' to make it into an assertion» (Geach 1955). According to Evans, such assertion would not admit of a *stable* evaluation as correct or incorrect; if we are to speak of correctness or incorrectness at all we must say that the assertion is correct at some times and not at others. He adds:

> Such a conception of assertion is not coherent. In the first place, I do not understand the use of our ordinary word 'correct' to apply to one and the same historical act at some times and not at others, according to the state of the weather. Just as we use the terms 'good' and 'bad', 'obligatory' and 'permitted' to make an assessment, once and for all, of non–linguistic actions, so we use the term 'correct' to make a once–and–for–all assessment of speech acts. Secondly, even if we strain to understand the notion 'correct–at–t', it is clear that a theory of meaning which states the semantic values of particular utterances solely by the use of it cannot serve as a theory of sense. If a theory of reference permits a subject to deduce merely that a particular utterance is now correct, but later will be incorrect, it cannot assist the subject in deciding what to say, nor in interpreting the remarks of others. What should he aim at, or take the others to be aiming at? Maximum correctness? But of course, if he knew an answer to this question, it would necessarily generate a once–and–for–all assessment of utterances, according to whether or not they meet whatever condition the answer gave. In fact, we know what he should do; he should utter sentence types true at the time of utterance. One who utters the sentence type «it is raining» rules out dry weather only at the time of utterance; he does not rule out later dryness, and hence there can be no argument from the later state of the weather to a reappraisal of his utterance. Utterances have to be evaluated according

> to what they rule out, and so different utterances of the same tensed sentences made at different times may have to be evaluated (once and for all) differently. They cannot therefore all be assigned the same semantic value (Evans 1996: 349–50).

MacFarlane thinks that although the view proposed by the Stoic logic that is being criticised is «manifestly implausible», the criticism is general enough to pose potential problems for «any view on which the truth of utterances is relativised to a context of assessment» (MacFarlane 2003: 332). Rephrasing Evans, he puts the objection in the following way: we aim to make sincere assertions, and this is tantamount to aiming to speak the truth. In cases of contextual sentences, there is no non–relativised fact of the matter as to whether our assertion is true or not, true relative to some contexts, untrue relative to others. How can we aim to speak the truth then? At best we can aim to speak the truth as assessed from such and such a context. But since the context of utterance does not pick out a uniquely relevant context of assessment, for if it did we would not need to relativise truth to a context of assessment at all, the context of utterance would provide all the information we needed to get the truth value. If truth is to be relative to a context of assessment, which in principle could be different every single time, then truth becomes entirely particular, and loses its overarching normative role. Evans' objection then, as MacFarlane understands it, is that once we give up the uniqueness of truth, once we allow for truth to multiply into 'truth relative to…' then we also lose the peculiar sense of truth as the norm of our assertive thought and talk.

Max Kölbel restates Evans' challenge even more perspicuously:

> The difficulty Evans sees is this: we must, in making and interpreting assertions, be able to make sense of the idea that the assertion is correct, so that we can aim to assert correctly (as speakers) or expect an assertion to be correct (as audience). However, if it is relative to perspectives whether the content expressed by an assertoric utterance is true, then there seems to be no sense in which the utterance can be correct or incorrect. The only way it could would be either in relation to some particular perspective or in relation to some, most or all perspectives. But if we were aiming for correctness in relation to some specific perspective p1, perhaps because it is related in some way to the context of utterance, then correctness would no longer be relative to perspectives because an utterance would be absolutely correct just if it is correct in relation to p1. The same goes for the quantificational options: if we were aiming for correctness in relation to some (most, every) perspective, then we would after all have an absolute correctness condition: an utterance is absolutely correct just if it is correct in relation to some (most, every) perspective. Thus, the

> idea of contents of assertion that have relative correctness (or truth) conditions is incoherent (Kölbel 2004: 308).

The difficulty then is: if MacFarlane is correct, and particular classes of assertions could be given both true and false values depending on varying contexts, then such context–relative truth cannot play a normative role in assertive speech acts, because a shifting, indeterminate relativised truth cannot be the aim and hence the norm of assertion. MacFarlane's scenario is similar to an archery contest where contestants are faced with several possible targets and can only find out after the contest if they aimed at (let alone hit) the correct target. It is not clear whether such an event would count as an archery contest as it is currently understood.

The converse of the argument also applies. If truth is the goal and hence the norm of an assertion, then it cannot be relative. As Kölbel points out, if an assertion is true relative to a perspective then the assertion is correct or incorrect in relation to one, some or maybe all perspectives. But once we specify the perspective in relation to which it is correct then we would no longer have relative truth, but absolute truth (for that perspective). We face the paradox that once we accept the normative role of truth, then we inevitably fall back on an absolute notion of truth.

MacFarlane's response to the challenge is to accept Evans' argument, but to question the underlying thinking about assertions and the norms governing them. He says:

> It is not obvious that 'aiming at the truth' should play any part in an account of assertion. If we aim at anything in making assertions, it is to have an effect on people: to inform them, to persuade them, amuse them, encourage them, insult them, or (often enough) mislead them. Even if we limit ourselves to sincere assertions, truth is only our indirect aim: we aim to show others what we believe, and we aim to believe what is true. If we misrepresent our beliefs but hit the truth anyway (because our beliefs are false), we have failed to make a sincere assertion, while if we miss the truth but accurately represent our beliefs, we have succeeded in making one. Perhaps belief or judgment constitutively aims at truth; assertion does not (2003: 334).

MacFarlane (2003, 2005a, 2005b) maintains that his version of relativism is indeed committed to the normative features of assertion because in making an assertion «one is committed to producing a justification, that is, giving adequate reasons for thinking that the sentence is true» (MacFarlane 2003: 334). This form of allegiance to the idea of normativity is based on Brandom's score keeping account, where making an assertion is logically linked with asking for reasons, providing justifications and withdrawing the assertion if

an adequate defence has not been provided. Such a process, according to MacFarlane, involves commitment to three norms:

(W) Commitment to withdraw the assertion if and when it is shown to have been untrue.
(J) Commitment to justify the assertion (provide grounds for its truth) if and when it is appropriately challenged.
(R) Commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts on or reasons from what is asserted, and it proves to have been untrue (MacFarlane 2005b: 318).

The relativistic version of this commitment based view runs as follows:

> In asserting that *p* at *a* context c_u, one commits oneself to providing adequate grounds for the truth of *p* (relative to c_u *and one's current context of assessment*), in response to any appropriate challenge […]. One can be released from this commitment only by withdrawing the assertion (2005a).

It's important to note that MacFarlane, unlike Crispin Wright and Searle who see truth as the norm and goal of assertion, does not think that the epistemic norms of assertion obligate a speaker to withdraw an assertion she believes or knows to be false, for «one can lie without violating the constitutive norms of assertion» (MacFarlane 2003: 335).

Assessing the dispute

To recap, Evans' argument against relativism about truth runs something like this: coherent thought and intelligible assertions presuppose stability both in the goal or target of enquiry and its objects of reference. It simply does not make sense to think of truth as the normative force necessarily governing assertions, unless we can give some generality and stability to that force. The relativist fails to do that. If what is true can shift depending on context, then we cannot claim that truth is necessarily the goal of assertion.

MacFarlane makes two connected arguments against Evans. Firstly, as we saw, he disputes the view that truth, in any obvious way, is the aim of an assertion. Assertions have more tangible goals, among them informing, persuading, amusing, encouraging, and even misleading one's interlocutors. However, truth, he admits, could be the aim of belief and thus indirectly the goal of a sincere assertion. But it is this second, weaker position that is de-

fended by philosophers who believe truth to be a guiding norm of an assertion. Truth becomes a constitutive norm of an assertion where by 'assertion' we mean speech actions that are performed with the aim of informing and with sincerity, hence MacFarlane's rejection of a much stronger version of the view misses the real target of the argument. We'll argue that MacFarlane does not succeed in showing that truth is an aim of assertions in this weaker sense.

MacFarlane's second move is to offer an alternative account of the sources of normativity. However, we should remember that Evans points to the incoherence of aiming at something unstable, rather than simply having truth as the aim of assertion. Thus it is not sufficient for MacFarlane to counter Evans through the argument that there are norms other than truth that could govern assertions. He also needs to show that these other aims don't create the type of instability that relativised truth does. And we believe that MacFarlane fails at this task as well.

On MacFarlane's model of assertion, when we talk about being committed to the truth of an assessment sensitive proposition we aim at saying things that are governed by the principles (W), (J) and (R). If Evans' argument regarding the need for stability of goals of assertion is correct, then MacFarlane has to show that (W), (J), and (R) are not susceptible to Evans' argument.

Let's take each one in turn. (W) states that it is a normative commitment to withdraw an assertion if and when it is shown to have been untrue. MacFarlane in effect replaces the idea of goal directedness, where truth is the goal, with that of commitment, where speakers are committed to the truth of their assertions. For how could we make sense of the normative injunction to try and avoid falsehoods other than a desire to maximise the stock of our true beliefs? Why would one be committed to withdrawing assertions when they are shown to have been untrue, unless asserting true propositions is the goal we are pursuing? It seems difficult, here and elsewhere, to maintain the epistemic normative position that MacFarlane wishes to maintain without reintroducing truth as the primary norm of assertion. MacFarlane may point out that his use of the epistemic norm of commitment marks a major departure from the goal directed position he is rejecting. But then MacFarlane's proposal is still vulnerable to Evans type criticisms of instability. For there are strong analogies between committing to x and aiming at x; for one thing they are both targeted actions. Commitment, MacFarlane admits, should be understood in behavioural terms. To be committed to x involves commitment to doing something, performing certain acts regarding x, etc. If, as argued, sincere assertions aim at informing then commitment to an assertion is a commitment to being informative, or a commitment to provide

correct (hence true) information. Because of these parallels, the very problems that truth–relativism poses for the idea of truth as the *norm of an assertion resurface* for the proposed idea of commitment. Just as it seems odd to aim at something that is not yet fixed or defined, it seems strange to describe your attitude towards something as one of commitment, if it is as yet unfixed and not quite known what it is that you are committed to. MacFarlane disagrees and provides several analogies to make his point.

The pitcher argument: according to MacFarlane, to commit oneself to a context sensitive, and hence shifting truth, is logically no more complex than a commitment to refill a pitcher (at any future time t_2) when it is known that the pitcher is empty (at t_1) (MacFarlane 2005b). The analogy, however, does not do the work assigned to it because of the differences between committing oneself to a relativised truth and committing oneself to fill an empty pitcher. I know what it means for a pitcher to be empty; the only thing I don't know very precisely is when this state will obtain. But with (W), I don't know if or when my assertion will be shown to be untrue nor do I know what context of assessment its untruth will be relative to. A closer analogy is to commit oneself to refill the pitcher if and when it becomes empty, but not knowing what or who exactly determines emptiness. But could we logically commit ourselves to such an indeterminate action? We think not. Contrary to MacFarlane's arguments, the pitcher example provides a good analogy for truth being the aim of an assertion: to commit oneself to fill a pitcher is to aim to have a full pitcher.

MacFarlane may counter that we can indeed have an idea of what a commitment to a variable or indeterminate goal is. Suppose I undertake the following commitment — each time somebody walks through that door, I will endeavour to greet him or her in their native language. Now, I don't know who will come through the door, and hence I don't know what language they will speak, so we cannot make it a specific commitment like «I will greet the next person through the door in German». The success conditions of my commitment are subject to an as yet undetermined context of assessment, and yet, the commitment is not nonsensical. But this analogy is not convincing either, for the setting almost inevitably presupposes a degree of success. For one thing, our linguistic greeter already possesses the information that he is supposed to greet people verbally, and knows what the conditions for fulfilling this task are. If we were to take seriously the idea that a context of assessment might be rich and various, and unknown in advance, then in this supposedly parallel case our greeter's commitments should not be fully determined. For example, it should be something along the lines of, «I undertake to react appropriately to whoever comes through that door»,

where the greeter does not know what exactly would count as an appropriate behaviour, smile, formal handshake, a hug, a formal bow, stiff indifference, etc. 'Appropriate behaviour' in this case is a placeholder for an indeterminate type and number of actions and hence cannot be seen either as aim of behaviour, nor would it provide coherent content of a definite commitment. Just like the pitcher analogy, our commitment has become an undertaking so vague as to lack any content, and hence not qualify as a commitment.

In *Future Contingents and Relative Truth*, MacFarlane provides yet another example in support of his position. Accepting the Evans view that *a–contextuality* does not provide us with a suitable candidate for a targeted assertion, we are asked to consider an alternative, illustrated by a multiplayer game:

> When I was young, my friends and I used to play multi–player Rochambeau [4]. In this game, whether a move counts as winning varies from opponent to opponent. A play of 'rock' will win with respect to an opponent who plays 'scissors', but lose to one who plays 'paper'. Though one cannot aim to win simpliciter, the game is not incoherent. It is just different from games in which winning is not relativised to opponents. Similarly, I suggest, assertions of a–contextual sentences, whose truth varies from one context of assessment to another, are not incoherent: they are just different from assertions of non–a–contextual sentences (MacFarlane 2003: 334).

In Evans' picture of assertion one can aim to win *simpliciter*, with *a–contextuality* one cannot. But just as a player of Rochambeau can win or lose depending on the moves made by the other players, the players of our relativised language game can also aim to conform generally to the principles (W), (J) and (R), even though they don't now know the exact circumstances in which one or more of these principle would be invoked, nor the exact contexts of assessment relative to which their assertions will be held to be true or untrue.

Once again, MacFarlane does not provide us with a convincing analogy and hence does not quite manage to undermine the case for the truth directedness of assertions. The players of Rochambeau, as in all other competitive games, aim at winning the game, the contention is that they cannot aim to win or lose *simpliciter*, but only relative to other players at the game. With each move of the game a player's status as a winner or loser would depend on and vary with what each of the other players does, and hence it could be characterised only relativistically. She will be making decisions based on the context of the game and whether these decisions lead to a win or not would depend on and vary relative to the actions of other players in the game.

[4] Also known as «Rock, Paper, Scissors».

The analogy does not quite work, because the scenario does not have relativistic consequences MacFarlane attributes to it. There are two problems, firstly the overall strategy of the game is not necessarily relativistic in the sense outlined by truth–relativists, and second, the relationship between truth and assertion is different from the relationship between games and winning.

On the game side of the disanalogy, a rational player of Rochambeau will be aiming at a winning strategy — maximally from all other players and minimally at least from one — and would decide on her strategies accordingly. For instance, she may work out that in a 4–player game it is easier to focus on two of the players only (for instance by concentrating on their body language and overall gaming strategies) and hence maximise one's wins in this manner. Such a game, if played well, would increase the chances of an overall win, even if our rational contestant loses the game relative to one of the other three players. In such a scenario, the players aim or commitment to winning and the condition for achieving an overall win are a stable unmoving target, but the specific strategic decisions are of course contextual. A commitment to a relatively true assertion does not have this level of specificity.

Similar criticisms could be levelled against MacFarlane's other norms of assertions. (J) involves commitment to justifying an assertion (provide grounds for its truth) if and when it is appropriately challenged. However, as Rorty suggests, «justification is relative to an audience and [...] we can never exclude the possibility that some better audience might exist, or come to exist, to whom a belief that is justifiable to us would not be justified [...]. For any audience one can imagine a better–informed audience and also a more imaginative one — an audience that has thought up hitherto undreamt–of alternatives to the proposed belief. The limits of justification would be the limits of language, but language (like imagination) has no limits» (Rorty 1998: 18). If this is true, then MacFarlane's norms of assertion involve a relativised notion of commitment, which poses problems similar to that of aiming at an unstable target. More importantly, despite MacFarlane's disavowal, (J) goes to reaffirm the central role of truth in the assertoric speech act. Why should one aim to justify one's assertions, to provide grounds for them, unless one is aiming to make true assertions? (J) becomes a norm of assertion only with the implicit assumption that we are aiming to make true statements. Now, if truth is relative, as MacFarlane claims, we end up facing the very dilemma that Evans sketched and MacFarlane is attempting to avoid.

Finally, principle (R) involves the commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts on or reasons from what is asserted, and it proves to have been untrue. (MacFarlane 2005b: 318). MacFarlane maintains that «asserting

is a bit like *giving one's word* that something is so, and our reactions to assertions that turn out to have been untrue can resemble our reactions to broken promises. We feel a legitimate sense of grievance, especially if we have acted on what we were told» (MacFarlane 2005b: 316).

Criticisms parallel to the ones leveled against (W) and (J) apply here. For one thing, to be responsible for x, is to know what one is responsible for. The analogy with aiming is quite clear. However, if truth is relative then it is not at all clear where the responsibility of the asserter lies. Secondly, as in the previous two instances, the link between the norm of being responsible and norm of truth seems unbreakable. How are we to understand MacFarlane's suggestion that «asserting is a bit like *giving one's word* that something is so» other than «asserting involves a commitment that one is aiming to say what is the case, to make correct statements, or to speak the truth»? If this is right, (R) like (W) and (J), ultimately links assertions to truth, so MacFarlane's attempts distancing the necessary connection between truth and assertion fails. Davidson wrote that «Relativism about truth is perhaps always a symptom of infection by the epistemological virus» (Davidson 1990: 298), in this particular case however, the infection works both ways and shows MacFarlane's vulnerability to Evans–type criticisms.

Conclusion

To conclude, in MacFarlane's version of the principles governing assertions (W), (J) and (R), commitment to the norms of justification, not truth, has the leading role. However, as we have seen, these commitments themselves involve the norm of truth. We have also argued that the idea of commitment to a normative principle comes very close to aiming at that principle. If we agree with Evans that, due to its instability, relative truth cannot be aimed at, it is hard to see what work the idea of truth is doing in MacFarlane's principles. Furthermore, his version of truth–relativism makes the targets of commitments in (W), (J) and (R) unstable and hence fails to meet Evans' objection [5].

maria.baghramian@ucd.ie
rhamilt@tcd.ie

[5] We would like to thank Dr. Paul O'Grady (Trinity College Dublin) for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Bibliography

Aristotle, 1949: *Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics*, Cambridge (Mass.), London, Harvard University Press.

Davidson, D., 1990: *The Structure and Content of Truth*, «Journal of Philosophy», 87, n. 6 (June 1990).

Evans, G., 1996: *Collected Papers*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Geach, P.T., 1955: *Review of B. Mates «Stoic Logic»*, «Philosophical Review», 64.

Goldman, A., 1986: *Epistemology and Cognition*, Cambridge (Mass.), London, Harvard University Press.

Kölbel, M., 2004: *Faultless Disagreement*, «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», 104 (1).

Lewis, D., 1979: *Attitudes De Dicto and De Se*, «Philosophical Review» 88 (4).

MacFarlane, J., 2003: *Future Contingents and Relative Truth*, «The Philosophical Quarterly», 53 (212), pp. 321–36.

MacFarlane, J., 2005a: *The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions*, «Oxford Studies in Epistemology», 1, pp. 197–233.

MacFarlane, J., 2005b: *Making Sense of Relative Truth*, «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», 105, pp. 305–23.

MacFarlane, J., 2007a: *Relativism and Disagreement*, «Philosophical Studies», 132, pp. 17–31.

MacFarlane, J., 2007b: *Semantic Minimalism and Nonindexical Contextualism*, in G. Preyer and G. Peter (ed.), *Context–Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism. New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 240–50.

MacFarlane, J., 2008: *Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths*, in M. Kölbel and M. García Carpintero (ed.), *Relative Truth*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 81–102.

MacFarlane, J., (forthcoming): *Epistemic Modals Are Assessment–Sensitive*, in B. Weatherson and A. Egan (ed.), *Epistemic Modality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Peirce, C.S., 1934: *Pragmatism and pragmaticism*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press.

Quine, W.V.O., 1986: *Reply to Morton White*, in L.E. Hahn, P.A. Schilpp, *The Philosophy of W.V. Quine*, La Salle, Open Court, pp. 663–65.

Rorty, R., 1991: *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, R., 1998: *Truth and progress*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J., 2001: *Rationality in action*, Cambridge (Mass.), London, MIT Press.

Wright, C., 1992: *Truth and objectivity*, Cambridge (Mass.), London, Harvard University Press.