

PHIL 6710: Epistemic Modality  
Weeks 7 and 8: Problems for Relativism<sup>1</sup>

**Assertion**

1. Suppose that propositions are assessment-relative. Are they the kinds of things that we might assert?
  - a. Egan (2007) argues that there is a market for the assertion of such things (last week).
2. What is one doing when one asserts such things?
  - a. MacFarlane (2002): When one asserts a sentence one is committed to producing, whenever the assertion is challenged, adequate reasons for thinking that the sentence is true relative to the context of utterance and the context of challenge.
  - b. But what about: 'It might be a boy and it might be a girl – we're about to find out which.' It seems that I ought to not make the first part of this assertion.
3. Suppose we have a norm of assertion: assert  $p$  only if  $p$  is true. Relativists typically modify this to: assert  $p$  only if  $p$  is true *relative to your point of assessment*. So speakers who assert things that are false relative to others (e.g. their audience) need not be violating this norm.
  - a. Is there or should there be a norm prohibiting asserting things that are false relative to your audience?
4. What if there is a norm of assertion: assert  $p$  only if you know  $p$ . Relativists need not modify this: they might say that although  $p$  is something whose truth is relative to a point of assessment, whether or not one stands in the *know* relation to  $p$  is not relative to a point of assessment.
  - a. Or they might say that to know  $p$  is to know that  $p$  is true; more specifically, to know that  $p$  is true relative to your point of assessment.
  - b. But then is it  $p$  that one knows? Or the distinct proposition: that  $p$  is true relative to your point of assessment?

**Belief**

5. Suppose that propositions are assessment-relative. Are they the kinds of things that we might believe?

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<sup>1</sup> On problems for relativism in general see Heck (2006) and Zimmerman (2007, pp. 324-43). On problems for relativism as applied to epistemic modality see Hawthorne (2007, pp. 94-5), Wright (2007, pp. 5-20), and von Fintel and Gillies (2008, pp. 81-94).

6. Zimmerman (2007) argues that they are not the kinds of things we do or can believe.
7. Intuition pump: 'I am happy'. This sentence has a meaning, independently of any context of use. One can grasp this thing. But one cannot believe it.
8. Intuition pump: I say: 'Nate is ready' (meaning that he is ready to quit this course); you say: 'Nate is ready' (meaning that he is ready to write his paper). There is something,  $x$ , that you and I have both expressed, whose truth is relative to a kind of action. But  $x$  is not the kind of thing that we do or can believe.
9. So too, an utterance of 'The ball might be under cup 1' might express something whose truth is relative to a point of assessment, but it is not the kind of thing that we do or can believe.
10. Perhaps we should be relativists about *some* of the things that we express with our utterances, but not about all of them. In particular, not about those things which are expressions of what we believe.
11. A question: how far does this extend? Are stock-standard world-relative propositions the kinds of things that we can believe?:

A: I believe that grass is black

B: In which world – the actual world?

A: No, no world. I just believe that grass is black

- a. Perhaps there are things whose truth is relative to a world, but can they be the objects of our beliefs?
- b. Consider the following dialogue (in @, Wylie was born on June 24; in #, he was born on June 25).

@worlder: 'Wylie was born on June 24.'

#worlder: 'That's false.'

@worlder: 'Well, it might be false where you are, but that's not what I meant.'

What I meant is something whose truth is not relative to a world. And perhaps that is the thing that I believe.

- c. Do the speakers below express the same beliefs?:

@worlder: 'Wylie was born on June 24'

#worlder: 'Wylie was born on June 24'

12. Lewis on de se beliefs. A: 'I am Hume', B: 'I am Hume'. They have given voice to the same belief. This belief is a property, the property of being Hume. The object of this belief, this property, gets a truth value only relative to an object (person). It is true *of* Hume, false of anyone else. Lewis proposes that all belief is self-ascription of properties.

### **Giving up too easily**

13. Hawthorne (2007, p. 94): “My complaint against the baroque semantics that emerges from relativist discussions does not concern its internal coherence. It is rather that its proponents (including my former self) typically pay insufficient attention to the shape of the data, and are insufficiently imaginative and patient about trying to explain the data in a more sober framework.”
14. Wright (2007, p. 15) suggests a contextualist account that might be able to handle the eavesdropper and retraction cases:
  - a. ‘Possibly S’ is true as uttered by S at *t* iff the prejacent *p* is compatible with what is known (or knowable by some envisaged class of methods, or easily knowable, or what would be negligent of them not to know) by any member of S’s conversational circle at *t*. (This is not quite how he words it.)
  - b. But I have doubts about this.

### **Heck’s concern**

15. Heck (2006). Concerned that the data MacFarlane (2003) appeals to only supports context-sensitivity in ‘What Bill said was true’, not assessment-relativity in the proposition expressed by Bill. He suggests that ‘what Bill said’ (or ‘that’) is context-sensitive, and that this is responsible for the context-dependence of ‘What Bill said was true’. What is said by an utterance need not be the proposition that is literally expressed: ‘I will not be here tomorrow’. ‘He said that we’re going to have a substitute teacher tomorrow’. On weds, ‘what Bill said’ can be understood as referring to either of at least two propositions – the one literally expressed by Bill (neither true nor false), and: there was a sea battle yesterday (true). This explains the varying intuitions.

### **Care about what is being assessed**

16. When someone asserts ‘Possibly S’ there are various things whose truth might be evaluated:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> von Fintel and Gillies (2008, pp. 82-3), Wright (2007, p. 6).

- a. ~~What the speaker expressed~~ (I don't like this)
- b. What the speaker said
- c. What the speaker meant
- d. What the speaker implicated
- e. The prejacent
- f. The grounds for the assertion
- g. What would be said by an utterance of the sentence in the assessor's context
- h. What would be meant by an utterance of the sentence in the assessor's context

Talk about *utterance* truth just seems to be fence-sitting, hedging (what is hedging?).

17. Responding to an utterance with 'that's right' or 'that's wrong' runs the risk of leaving it unclear (a) whether it is truth and falsity at issue, and (b) which thing is being assessed.

A: It might be under cup 1.

B: That's right. (risky)

B: That's true. It might be. (better)

B: That's true. It is. (better)

### **The shape of the retraction data**

18. With retractions we say, 'What I said *was* false', not 'What I said *is* false' (assuming for now that it is *what was said* that is being assessed).

a. If the assessment follows the utterance closely enough, then it can be ok to say: 'What I said *is* false'. But after a long time it is very odd to use 'is' rather than 'was'

b. It seems that if relativists are right then we ought to use 'is'.<sup>3</sup>

c. In support of this, consider a transworld case. Jo in the actual world says: 'Wylie is a hunk'. Jo shuttles to another (very distant) world where Wylie is not a hunk. She might say: 'What I said is false here'; she would not say: 'What said is false there'.

d. She might even say: 'What I said is false here, but back where I said it it is true'.

e. Similarly, if relativists are right, then the 'retraction' should go like this: 'What I said is false, but back when I said it it was true.' But this is not how the retractions go. Wright (2007, pp. 12-4) makes this point.

### **Eavesdroppers don't always judge false**

19. Eavesdroppers in the know do not always judge an utterance of 'Possibly S' to be false.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See von Fintel and Gillies (2008, p. 84).

<sup>4</sup> Noted by Hawthorne (2007), Wright (2007), and von Fintel and Gillies (2008).

- a. Example from Hawthorne (2007). Suzy says: ‘John might be on that bus’; John judges it to be true (even though John knows he is not on the bus).
  - b. Another (p. 95). Franks says: ‘The keys might be in the bathroom, and they might be in the kitchen.’ I know where they are, but am not inclined to judge the utterance to be false.
  - c. Example from Wright (2007, pp. 15-16). Sergeant says to his men, ‘Keep down, there might be snipers on the ridge.’ An observer knows that there are not, but still judges the utterance to be true.<sup>5</sup>
  - d. This is not predicted by a relativist account according to which the relevant body of knowledge is always the knowledge of the assessor – it declares these utterances to be false relative to these assessors.
20. The more general formulation I have given might handle these cases ok.
21. But there is reason to think not: in at least some cases the truth of an utterance of ‘Possibly S’ depends not on what anyone knows, but on what possibilities the speaker is open to. Two cups case:
- S: It might be under cup 1 and it might be under cup 2  
 E: That’s false – it’s under neither  
 S: It might be under cup1 and it might be under cup 2 and it might be under neither  
 E: #That’s false – it’s under neither
22. Hawthorne raises a related concern. ‘John might be on that bus.’ If John never travels on buses he is far less inclined to judge the utterance as true. His never travelling on buses makes a difference to the intuitive verdict. The relativist does not have the resources to explain this. Not even with my more general formulation.
23. Note that this is a problem for the standard account as well – the truth of an utterance of ‘Possibly S’ sometimes depends on factors that seem to have nothing to do with what anyone knows (Hawthorne offers an account that allows for this, in terms of *danger*).

**Speakers do not always retract**

24. Example from von Fintel and Gillies (2008, p. 81):
- A: The keys might be in the drawer.  
 B: They’re not, why did you say that?  
 A: I didn’t say they *were*, I said they *might* be, and they might have been.
25. Example from Wright (2007, p. 7). Sue says to Ted who is heading off with a chainsaw: ‘You could get horribly hurt’. Ted comes back not hurt. It would be unnatural for Sue to

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<sup>5</sup> Wright’s description of the case is less than ideal.

say: 'Sorry, I was wrong', but natural to say: 'You're a fool, you could have been horribly hurt.' Relativists predict the first.

- a. Another example. Sue buys a lottery ticket. Ted tells her she is wasting her money. Sue says: 'Not at all, I might win.' Sue does not win. It would be unnatural for Sue to say: 'I was wrong. It wasn't true that I might win', but natural to say: 'I still might have won.' Relativism wrongly predicts the former.
- b. But is it *epistemic* possibility in these cases?
- c. Note: if Sue finds out that the lottery was rigged then the naturalness switches around.

### **Problematic eavesdropper utterances**

26. Eavesdroppers in the know sometimes say things that are false on the relativist account:
  - a. Hawthorne (2007, p. 94). John says: 'Suzy is hiding because I might be on that bus', even though John knows that he is not.
  - b. Wright (2007, pp. 16). Sergeant says: 'What are you thinking? There could be snipers on the ridge', even though Sergeant knows that there are not.
  - c. These utterances are false according to a relativist account on which the relevant body of knowledge is always the knowledge of the assessor.
  - d. The relativist might try evading these cases:
    - i. White lies
    - ii. Projection
    - iii. Elliptical speech
  - e. Otherwise, it seems that the relativist needs to allow that the relevant body of knowledge is sometimes not the assessor's. The way I have formulated the relativist account might allow for this.

### **Problems with 'must'**

27. Hawthorne (2007, p. 95). John on his way to the store says: 'Susan must be in the store'; it does not follow from what I know that Susan is in the store. On the relativist account the utterance is false relative to me. But I am not inclined to judge it to be false (nor true – I need to know more about what Frank knows).
  - a. Related case (fn. 14). A says: 'The keys must be in the kitchen'. I know that they are in the kitchen, but also that A hasn't ruled out the bathroom. I'm inclined to judge the utterance to be false. But relativism predicts that it is true relative to me.

### **Time lag**

28. von Fintel and Gillies (2008, pp. 84-6). Ought to be more inclined to retract ‘might’ claims made in the past as time goes on (because our knowledge tends to grow), but in actual fact we are less inclined. We put a randomly chosen card in an envelope. You notice that it’s black, and say ‘It might be the king of spades.’ Ten years later we open it and it’s the jack of clubs. Would be unnatural to say, ‘what you said is false’.

### **Tense**

29. von Fintel and Gillies (2008, pp. 87-8). Sophie looks in the freezer. ‘Why did you look in the freezer? Because there might have been ice cream in the freezer.’ Past(possible(ice cream in the freezer)). We want it to come out that what Sophie says is true. Relativist theories do not deliver this result.

### **Gibbarding**

30. von Fintel and Gillies (2008, pp. 88-9). For all Boss knows, P, Q, R might each be the turncoat. Jack says to Boss: ‘It must be that either P is the turncoat or Q is the turncoat’. Zack says to Boss: ‘It must be that either Q is the turncoat or R is the turncoat’. Boss concludes that Q is the turncoat. But according to relativism, Boss concludes something he thinks is false on the basis of reports he thinks are false.

a. We need to be more careful here.

### **Presupposition failures**

31. von Fintel and Gillies (2008, pp. 93-4). Presupposition failure failures. ‘If Blofeld realizes that you might be in Zurich then you can breathe easy’ is true, but ‘you might be in Zurich’ is false, and so we should have presupposition failure.

### **Embedded epistemic modals**

32. Wright’s (2007, pp. 17-9) problem with ‘EP[Q] & EP[not EP[Q]]’. The relativist can’t claim that it is to be understood as ‘EP<sub>X</sub>[Q] & EP<sub>X</sub>[not EP<sub>Y</sub>[Q]]’. This suggests that he is understanding the relativist position more narrowly than I have been – he does not allow that ‘Possibly S’ is context-sensitive.