A NOTE ON ASSERTION, RELATIVISM AND FUTURE CONTINGENTS

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ABSTRACT: I argue that John MacFarlane's attempt to reconcile his proposed truth-relativist account of future contingents with a plausible account of assertion is self-defeating. Specifically, a paradoxical result of MacFarlane's view is that assertions of future contingents are impermissible for anyone who already accepts MacFarlane's own truth-relativist account of future contingents.

KEYWORDS: assertion, truth-relativism, future contingents

Do future contingents have truth values? This is an important question for the purposes of theorising about assertion, and in particular, assertoric norms. Norms of correctness govern assertions, and these norms are epistemic in nature.[1] For example: "assert p only if you know p"[2] or, more weakly, "assert p only if p is true."[3] If future contingents don't have truth values – if presently it is neither true nor false that "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" – then, if (for instance) either the knowledge or truth norm of assertion is correct, the assertion "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" is a defective assertion.[4] Moreover, if it is impermissible to assert "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" given one's epistemic grounds, then plausibly

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[1] For an overview of recent work on norms of assertion, see Jennifer Lackey, "Norms of Assertion," *Noûs* 41 (2007): 594-626.

[2] e.g. Timothy Williamson, "Knowing and asserting," *The Philosophical Review* 105, 4 (1996): 489-523, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Keith DeRose, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Context," *The Philosophical Review* 111 (2002): 167-203; John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[3] e.g. Michael Dummett, "Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1959): 141-62; Matthew Weiner, "Must We Know What We Say?" *Philosophical Review* 114 (2005): 227-251. A middle ground 'justificationist account of assertion' has been defended recently by Douven (Igor Douven, "Assertion, Knowledge and Rational Credibility" *The Philosophical Review* 115 (2006): 449-485), Lackey (Lackey, "Norms of Assertion") and Kvanvig (Jonathan Kvanvig, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Lotteries," in *Williamson on Knowledge*, eds. Duncan Pritchard and Patrick Greenough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140-160). Roughly, the view is: assert p only if you are justified in believing that p is true.

[4] I take this example from John MacFarlane "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53, 212 (2003): 321-336.

it is impermissible to use "There will be a sea battle tomorrow as a premise in one's practical reasoning."[5] But, providing one's evidence sufficiently supports a sea battle taking place tomorrow, it seems entirely permissible to assert "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" and it seems perfectly rational to use this as a premise in one's practical reasoning.

The natural response to these considerations is to suppose future contingents must have truth values; this is the determinacy intuition: an intuition that gains additional support from the thought that, when taking a retrospective view, utterances that 'turned out true' were true at the time of utterance[6]. Accordingly then, when I assert "There will be a sea battle tomorrow," my assertion counts as true if, tomorrow, there is a sea battle.

This result stands at odds with the indeterminacy intuition that, at the time of the utterance, multiple histories are possible, including one where there was a sea battle, and the proposition is true and one where there is not, and the proposition is false. The indeterminacy intuition leads us to think the truth value of future contingents is indeterminate at the time of utterance, and either true or false at a later time. John MacFarlane[7] thinks that both the indeterminacy intuition and the determinacy intuition should be taken at face value and that the only way to account for the semantics of future contingents is to allow the truth values of future contingents to be doubly relativised: to both the context of utterance and the context of assessment. On MacFarlane's proposal, when we evaluate the future contingent "There will be a sea battle tomorrow," this counts as neither true nor false when the context of assessment is the context in which the utterance is being made (as multiple possible histories are presumed open at this point). If the context of assessment is the following day, when there is a sea battle, the statement is 'true' and if there is not one, 'false.'

A key element of MacFarlane's position is that it rejects an assumption of the absoluteness of utterance-truth: the assumption that the truth value of an utterance

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[5] It has become recently popular to suggest that knowledge is the epistemic norm of practical reasoning. For an especially clear presentation of this position, see Jessica Brown, "Knowledge and Practical Reason," *Philosophy Compass* 3, 6 (2008): 1135-1152. See, however, Mikkel Gerken, "Warrant and Action," *Synthese* 178, 3 (2011): 529-547, for a plausible case in favour of thinking that knowledge will be (many times) required to warrant action even though the matter of whether it, or merely justification, is required to warrant action shifts across contexts.

[6] As MacFarlane notes, it is commonplace to reason as follows: "Jake asserted yesterday that there would be a sea battle today / There is a sea battle today / So Jake's assertion was true." (MacFarlane, "Future Contingents," 325)

[7] MacFarlane "Future Contingents."

is independent of the context from which the utterance is being assessed.[8] In opposing the absoluteness of utterance-truth, MacFarlane's position on the semantics of future contingents is markedly relativistic.[9] The slippery slope from relativist semantics for future contingents to a more wide-ranging relativist semantics doesn't bother MacFarlane. "Future contingents are important because they force us to abandon absoluteness, liberating us from its conceptual bonds elsewhere."[10]

What I'm interested in engaging with here is not the big-picture worry regarding the implications of a relativist semantics for future contingents for other cases. My focus will be on the matter of whether MacFarlane's relativist semantics for future contingents is plausible. And on this score, my focus will be assertion. MacFarlane recognizes that rejecting the absoluteness of utterance-truth assumption stands in some tension with providing a plausible account of assertion. He attempts to reconcile this problem, but I do not think he does so successfully. MacFarlane's attempt to reconcile his relativism about future contingents with a plausible account of assertion stems in part from his attempt to reply to a potential objection from Gareth Evans[11] on this score. As Evans writes:

> 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 .... 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 we aim at, or take 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

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[8] MacFarlane's preferred 'truth-relativism' (in several areas of discourse) holds the truth-values of utterances to be determined always in part by a context of assessment. As Crispin Wright puts it: vary [the context of assessment] and the truth value of the utterance can vary, even though the context of its making and the associated state of the world remain fixed (Crispin Wright, "New Age Relativism and Epistemic Possibility: The Question of Evidence," *Philosophical Issues* 17, 1 (2007): 262-283).

[9] MacFarlane has defended truth-relativism in various domains of discourse including epistemic modals, predicates of personal taste and knowledge attributions. For lucid presentations of MacFarlane's truth-relativism, see his "Making Sense of Relative Truth," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005): 321–39. Reprinted in *Relativism: A Compendium*, ed. Michael Krausz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). For a helpful outline of MacFarlane's faultless-disagreement-style argumentative strategy for defending truth-relativism in other areas, see his "Relativism and Disagreement," *Philosophical Studies* 132 (2007): 17-31.

[10] MacFarlane, "Future Contingents," 336.

[11] Gareth Evans, "Does Tense Logic Rest on a Mistake?" (1985) in Gareth Evans, *Collected Papers* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 2005), 346-63.

utterances, according to whether or not they meet whatever condition the answer gave.[12]

MacFarlane's reply to Evans is nuanced. He claims that in making an assertion, one commits oneself to the truth of the claim (and so MacFarlane recognizes something like the truth norm for assertion); however, the kind of commitment this is specifically is a commitment to produce a justification – that is "giving adequate reasons for thinking that the sentence is true (relative to its context of utterance and the asserter's current context of assessment), whenever that assertion is challenged."[13] Call this, following Teresa Marques[14] the "meet-the-challenge" norm. Applying this view: if someone challenges (today) MacFarlane's protagonist (Jake)'s assertion (yesterday) that "There will be a sea battle tomorrow," "Jake can meet the challenge by pointing to ships fighting."[15] This is fine and well. But the problem arises for MacFarlane with respect to the way his view handles Jake's utterance "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" when the context of assessment is the same as the context of utterance. Following MacFarlane, let m_0 be the point at which the utterance is made (and a sea battle will not have either occurred or failed to occur until tomorrow). Here MacFarlane says (with a bit of background):

> In asserting "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" at m_0, Jake comes to be bound by certain obligations. For example, if someone challenges the assertion at m_0, Jake must give adequate reasons for thinking it is true, relative to the context of utterance m_0 and context of assessment m_0. If the challenge takes the form of a conclusive demonstration that it is not yet settled whether there will be a sea battle, Jake will not be able to meet the challenge, and he will be obliged to withdraw his assertion. But if the challenge is weaker, and he meets it, his assertion can stand.[16]

The problem here is that MacFarlane's promissory note – that if the challenge is weaker, Jake's assertion can stand – is not one that can be upheld. In

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[12] Evans, "Does Tense Logic," 349. Greenough has sought to encapsualte the key elements of Evans's challenge as follows: (1) The question 'What should [an assertor] aim at?" is a legitimate question. (2) Any legitimate answer to this question will generate a once-and-for-all answer. (3) Any once-and-for-all answer is incompatible with Truth-Relativism (4) Therefore, Truth Relativism is ruled out (Patrick Greenough, "Relativism, Assertion and Belief," in *Assertion*, eds. Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2).

[13] MacFarlane, "Future Contingents," 335.

[14] Teresa Marques, "Relativism and the Norm of Assertion," *LANCOG – Seminar Series in Analytic Philosophy 2008-09*, http://www.lancog.com/sem0809.html (last visited February 15, 2012).

[15] MacFarlane, "Future Contingents," 335.

[16] MacFarlane, "Future Contingents," 335.

fact, a direct implication of MacFarlane's relativist view will be that Jake's assertion is never permissible. Generalizing from this, we get the *reductio* that no future contingent assertions are permissible (and, likewise, no future contingents can viable to use as premises in practical reasoning). Why does MacFarlane's promissory note not hold up? This is because, put roughly, an individual S cannot provide an adequate justification for believing some assertion φ when S is not justified in believing that φ is true. Let's revisit the case of Jake, who asserts (at m_0) "There will be a sea battle tomorrow." Relative to the context of assessment at m_0, Jake's statement is neither true nor false but indeterminate. This is the result MacFarlane wants. However, MacFarlane can't get this result as well as the result that Jake's assertion is not epistemically defective. Even if we grant MacFarlane's preferred epistemic norm governing assertion – a sort of justificationist[17] norm according to which the rule is "assert p only if you can adequately justify p [to a potential challenger] at the time of assertion" – Jake fails to be justified in believing what he asserts. Though that's not quite right: more precisely, Jake would fail to be justified in believing what he asserts *if he also accepts that MacFarlane's relativism about future contingents is correct*. For if Jake does accept MacFarlane's account of future contingents, then Jake would not be able to adequately justify that his assertion "There will be a sea battle tomorrow" is true given that he accepts implicitly that it is (on MacFarlane's semantics) not true, but rather, neither true, nor false. So even if the challenge to Jake at m_0 was, as MacFarlane intimates, a 'weak challenge,' Jake will not in principle be able to provide an adequate justification for believing what he asserts as true, given his implicit belief that it is not (at m_0) true.

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[17] I am taking it that MacFarlane's variety of a justificationist norm of assertion is a close cousin of the sort of justificationist norm of assertion defended by Lackey (Lackey, "Norms of Assertion"), Douven (Douven, "Assertion, Knowledge") and Kvanvig (Kvanvig, "Assertion, Knowledge"). Where MacFarlane's account comes apart from these other justificationist views is that the traditional justificationist position articulates the epistemic norm as one satisfied just in case one possesses certain reasons or evidence for the asserted proposition. MacFarlane on the other hand advances the specific requirement that one be able to provide such a successful justification to a challenger. A case where these two accounts come apart will be one where the agent's justification, though successful in response to a challenge, is not itself one the agent is justified in believing. For example, suppose I justify to a challenger my intentionally deceptive assertion that "The house is not for sale" to a challenger by pointing to a yard with no for-sale sign, even though I know that that the house has been put on the market that day and that the sign will be put up tomorrow. I take it that my case (awkwardly) satisfies MacFarlane's variety of the justificationist norm while violating the more traditional version of a justificationist norm, according to which the assertion would be epistemically defective. That said, MacFarlane's version will nonetheless align with the traditional version is a wide variety of cases.

So MacFarlane gets the awkward result that Jake is permitted to assert what he does only if Jake doesn't already accept MacFarlane's theory. This result is simply unacceptable. MacFarlane might reply by saying that Jake's justification of his belief (when challenged) at m_0 is successful so long as he justifies why it would be permissible to act as if his assertion were true. But to go this route would be to give up entirely on the view that assertions, as a category of speech act, are governed by any properly epistemic norm, and this would be an equally problematic result. I think the considerations given here are a serious mark against a relativist semantics for future contingents.