

# Three Forms of Truth Relativism

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The received view about propositions—what is said by indicative sentences when assertively uttered on an occasion of use—is that they have their truth value absolutely: A proposition represents a way for part of the world to be. If the relevant part of the world is as the proposition represents it as being then the proposition is true, otherwise it is false. Several authors have recently challenged the received view, arguing that at least in some areas of discourse propositional truth ought to be *relativized* to contexts of assessment.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the areas of discourse which appear to require a relativization of propositional truth are discourse concerning subjective matters such as taste and humor as well as discourse involving epistemic modals.

In this paper, I explore an alternative account of the data appealed to by propositional relativists, an account which allows us to hold on to the standard Fregean view of propositions as absolute with respect to some of the controversial areas of discourse.<sup>2</sup> The account proposed, *factual relativism*, involves two key ingredients. First, an analysis of the relevant facts—facts about taste and epistemic facts—as partially “configured” through or “structured” by a perspective. Second, attention to the distinction between the propositional *content* of an utterance and the *judgment* expressed with the utterance. The apparatus employed by factual relativism allows us to model, in an intuitively appealing way, the contents of assertions about subjective matters of fact as well as the states of affairs asserted to obtain.

I will start by developing a factual relativist account of matters of taste and apply it to the data which might tempt one to relativize propositional

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, MacFarlane [8] and [7], Kölbel [5] and Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson [2].

<sup>2</sup>I do not believe that every area of discourse for which a relativization of propositional truth has been urged can be analyzed as proposed here. In particular, future contingents (see MacFarlane [6]) do not appear to admit of such an analysis. Therefore, this paper presents at best a partial case against deviating from the Fregean orthodoxy.

truth. To show the potential of the approach, I sketch an analogous account of the facts reported by statements involving epistemic modals. I then compare propositional with factual relativism, examine the assumptions underlying both and argue that factual relativism is preferable as it preserves the close link between the propositional content of a statement and the fact represented by that content.

## 1 Modeling Matters of Taste

People differ in their assessment of what tastes good. Consider: Moira asserts

- (1) Vegemite tastes great.

Clem retorts

- (2) No it doesn't, Vegemite tastes awful.

Here, we take Moira and Clem to be disagreeing about whether Vegemite tastes great. Further, most of us are willing to grant that none of them has made a mistake. Their disagreement is, as is sometimes said, *blameless*.<sup>3</sup>

*Three Strategies.* Three types of strategy have been pursued to give a semantics for statements like (1) which do justice to our intuitions about exchanges like the above. (i) *Expressivism* has it that such statements do not express truth-evaluable contents at all. Rather, they merely express a positive or negative attitude to the taste of Vegemite. In what follows I will ignore this strategy. (ii) *Indexical relativism*, or *contextualism*, has it that (1) expresses different propositions on different occasions of use.<sup>4</sup> One familiar way to implement this strategy is to take (1) to express roughly the same as 'Vegemite tastes great to me'. On this strategy, disagreement about matters of taste is merely apparent: When Moira assertively utters (1) and Clem assertively utters (2) they do not express contradictory contents. Finally, (iii) *propositional relativism*, has it that while (1) expresses the same proposition across different occasions of use, the proposition it expresses has different truth-values relative to different contexts of assessment. It is true

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<sup>3</sup>See Kölbel [5]. I am not concerned here with arguing that the dialogue does in fact present a case of blameless disagreement. Rather, I will assume that it does and explore the theoretical options for accounting for it.

<sup>4</sup>Cappelen and Lepore explore a variation of indexical relativism according to which (1) expresses different propositions on different occasions of *assessment*. See their paper in this volume for details.

when evaluated relative to Moira's context and false when evaluated relative to Clem's even though the world remains the same in all relevant respects. This represents a clear departure from the standard view according to which the truth of a proposition depends only to what the world is like.

I will develop a further strategy, *factual relativism* which has it that the relevant *facts* vary across contexts of assessment, in a sense to be made precise.

*Methodology.* In our investigation, we need to keep two issues separate. On the one hand there is the *metaphysical* question of the nature of the facts in the area of interest, in our case the facts concerning taste. These are the things in the world that the truth of our statements is sensitive to. Second there is the *semantic* question of how the truth-conditions of statements about the area of interest are to be given in terms of the facts of that area. *Facts* and *meanings* are theoretical concepts introduced to systematically account for our linguistic behavior and cognitive interaction with the world. As usual, there is a trade-off between complicating the metaphysics while simplifying the semantics on the one hand and complicating the semantics while simplifying the metaphysics on the other. I see the propositional relativist as complicating the semantics, making propositional truth depend on an additional parameter. Factual relativism, on the other hand, complicates the metaphysics and so can give a simpler account of the semantics of the statements in question.

There are, however, constraints on what trade-offs we should be willing to accept. A complication in the metaphysics should be justifiable independently, as should be a deviation in the semantics. In section 3 I will argue that, unlike factual relativism, the modification proposed by the propositional relativist gives propositions a theoretical role without much intuitive anchoring.

*The Meaning of Taste Statements and the Facts they Represent.* Statements like (1) appear to report facts about what tastes good simpliciter (call these *general* taste-facts) rather than facts about what tastes good to some particular group of tasters (call these *particular* taste-facts). However, matters of taste are largely subjective. Whether a particular item tastes good depends not just on the physio-chemical features of that item, but also on physiological and psychological features of tasters.

Since matters of taste are subjective, one may hold that there are no general but only particular taste facts. Taken at face-value, all positive general taste-statements would then be false, as the general facts they report

do not obtain. In analogy with a similar thesis in ethics, this account would have to be accompanied with an error-theory: Speakers of English regularly and unknowingly utter falsehoods when they say of an item that it tastes good. Alternatively, general taste statements may be reinterpreted and their truth-conditions accounted for in terms of the particular taste facts. Options for how this might be accomplished include the following:

- $\lceil x \text{ tastes great} \rceil$  is true when uttered by  $i$  iff  $x$  tastes great to  $i$
- $\lceil x \text{ tastes great} \rceil$  is true iff  $\forall t : x$  tastes great to  $t$
- $\lceil x \text{ tastes great} \rceil$  is true in context  $c$  iff  $\forall t \in T : x$  tastes great to  $t$ , where  $T$  is a contextually salient community of tasters.

These all amount to a form of indexical relativism with the context of utterance determining the content expressed and thus the particular taste-facts relevant for evaluating the statement. None of these is entirely satisfactory. On the first construal, Moira's and Clem's utterances do not express contradictory contents. They do not disagree. On the second construal, only very few, if any, positive general taste-statements are ever true. Propositional relativists argue that the third construal clashes with the data concerning typical conversational exchanges about matters of taste.<sup>5</sup>

I propose a different stance. Matters of taste are subjective, but that does not force us to deny the existence of general taste facts: While there are no *objective* general taste facts, we may admit that there are *subjective* general taste facts. *These* are the facts represented by general taste-statements. If we accept this option, our task consists in (i) giving an account of how to think about these facts, and (ii) giving a semantics for statements which represent such facts. The next two sections will tackle the first sub-task while the subsequent two address the second one.

*The Structure of Taste Facts.* Subjective general taste facts are determined by a combination of two factors: The world itself, independent of any particular tasters, determines the physio-chemical features of items on the bases of which tasters classify them as tasting good or bad. It also determines the physio-chemical features of individual *tasters* which are responsible for their classifying certain items as tasting good or bad. The world thus uniquely determines the particular taste facts yet not the general ones. Call the contribution made by the world a *substratum*. The second contributing factor is a collection of physiological and psychological features of *particular* tasters.

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<sup>5</sup>See Kölbel [5].

I will call the contribution of particular tasters a *(taste-)perspective* and say that a perspective *induces* taste-facts over a substratum. I don't want to commit myself here to a specific analysis of what the relevant substrata and perspectives are and how the two interact to induce taste-facts. The details of that story depend on the physiology of taste and are beyond the scope of the present paper.

The taste-facts jointly determined by the substratum and a perspective are *subjective* or *perspectival*, depending not just on the world but also on the perspective that induces them. Over the same substratum, one perspective induces the (perspectival) fact that Vegemite tastes great, while another perspective (mine for instance) induces the (perspectival) fact that Vegemite tastes awful. In effect, the analysis given reconceptualizes *objective particular* taste facts as *subjective general* taste facts.

*Representing Possible Worlds.* I now introduce the representational apparatus to model possible worlds in which some facts are induced by a perspective. Let  $S$  be the collection of possible substrata, that is the possible contributions the world itself can make to the taste facts. A substratum, we may assume, determines all the physical facts of a world, including the distribution of physio-chemical properties over potential candidates for taste-ascriptions. We may further assume that it fixes all the *particular* taste facts such as the fact that Vegemite tastes great to Moira. Let  $P$  be the collection of possible perspectives—collections of the features of a particular taster (or homogeneous group of tasters) which determine how things taste to that taster.

A possible world with determinate general taste facts can be represented by a pair  $\langle s, p \rangle$ , where  $s$  is a substratum and  $p$  is a perspective. The actual substratum from my perspective, represented by  $\langle s_{@}, p_I \rangle$ —with  $s_{@}$  being the actual substratum and  $p_I$  being my perspective—is a world in which the general taste facts are determined by my sensibilities. It differs from, say, the actual substratum from Moira's perspective,  $\langle s_{@}, p_M \rangle$ : In  $\langle s_{@}, p_I \rangle$  Vegemite tastes awful while in  $\langle s_{@}, p_M \rangle$  it tastes great. Different possible worlds with the same substratum coincide in their objective facts, but differ in their subjective (general) taste-facts, as these are induced by different perspectives. For ease of expression, I will use 'the world' to refer to the actual substratum, so that 'the world from Moira's perspective' refers to  $\langle s_{@}, p_M \rangle$ .

So far I have talked about the nature of the relevant facts. They are understood as subjective and modeled by combining a subjective taste-

perspective with an objective substratum. What is the semantic payoff of this construal? Is it worth it, from a semantic point of view, to buy into the metaphysics of subjective facts?

*Propositions and Assertions.* Within the above framework, the propositional contents of statements concerning matters of taste can be modeled in the familiar way as functions from worlds—worlds in which a substratum and a perspective jointly determine the general taste facts—to truth-values. The proposition expressed by ‘Vegemite tastes great’ is true relative to a world just in case Vegemite tastes great in that world. There is no need to further relativize propositional truth to a context of assessment as the relativizer has been built into the worlds. This allows the *contents* of statements representing subjective facts to abstract away from particular subjective perspectives and thereby capture the common feature of perspectival worlds which coincide as far as the subjective facts in question are concerned.<sup>6</sup>

On the proposed account, Moira and Clem do express contradictory propositions when they utter (1) and (2) respectively. However, we do need a further semantic notion to fully account for our intuitions about their exchange. For not only do they contradict each other. We also want to grant that—given Moira’s love for Vegemite and Clem’s hate of it—each of them has, in a sense, said something true. Something “true for them” as it were. But what does that mean? None said something true about the world simpliciter because the world simpliciter, the substratum, does not determine any general taste-facts. The sense in which Moira said something true when she uttered (1) is that she said something true about the world structured by her perspective. And Clem said something true about the world structured by *his* perspective. That might look problematic: If what Moira said is answerable to the facts in “her” world, while what Clem said is answerable to facts in “his” world, then how can it be that they said exactly the same? Does this not amount to a form of indexical relativism (‘In my world, Vegemite tastes great’)?

It does not. Here, we have to take seriously the distinction between the *propositional content* of an utterance as used on an occasion and the *assertion* a speaker makes by means of that utterance—the *judgment* he expresses. When a speaker judges that *p*, he in effect judges that *p* holds in the world actual for him. For example, when I judge that Mont Blanc is the Alps’ highest peak, I in effect judge that in the actual world, Mont Blanc is

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<sup>6</sup>I will look more closely at the representationality of such statement and the subjective-objective issue in section (3).

the Alps' highest peak. That does not mean, however, that reference to the actual world figures in the propositional content of an actual utterance of 'Mont Blanc is the highest peak in the Alps'. The statement 'It is necessary that Mont Blanc is the highest peak in the Alps' is, after all, not true. If the necessity-operator is understood as operating on the propositional content of the embedded sentence, then the proposition expressed by 'Mont Blanc is the highest peak in the Alps' had better not be world-bound. When my "twin" in a possible world in which the Matterhorn is the Alps' highest peak utters 'Mont Blanc is the highest peak in the Alps' she expresses the same proposition I express when uttering that sentence, yet she asserts it of her world and thus she asserts something false.

Similarly with the exchange between Moira and Clem: They both express the same proposition when uttering 'Vegemite tastes great'. But Moira expresses a judgment about her world while Clem expresses a judgment about his—they apply the same propositional content to different perspectival worlds. Thus, the factual relativist move can be seen as a natural extension of the standard account: Sentences without any context-sensitive elements express the same proposition regardless of the possible situation in which they are uttered, yet the truth-values of the propositions expressed vary across these situations.<sup>7</sup>

*Accommodating Faultless Disagreement.* Within the framework proposed here, we can distinguish between three degrees of disagreement. The first degree consists in mere syntactic contradiction: Two people disagree in this sense when they utter sentences one of which is a negation of the other. The second degree consists in asserting contradictory contents, that is contents which represent incompatible facts. The third and highest degree consists in asserting contradictory contents of the same world.

Indexical relativism accommodates faultless disagreement by capturing the first and weakest degree of disagreement: The speakers disagreeing utter contradictory sentences, but these sentences receive interpretations on which the contents expressed are not incompatible. Factual relativism does not, like indexical relativism, factor the relativizer into the proposition expressed (as in *Vegemite tastes good in my world*) but into the act of asserting a judgment: A speaker asserts a statement with a constant propositional content (such as *Vegemite tastes great*) of her world. This lets us to capture disagreement of the second degree: The speakers disagreeing utter contra-

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<sup>7</sup>Here, I assume that the same semantic rules are at work in these counterfactual situations.

dictory sentences, and these sentences receive interpretations on which the contents they express are incompatible. What allows for the disagreement to be faultless is the fact that the speakers might correctly judge the contradictory contents expressed to hold of their respective worlds. Propositional relativism seeks to accommodate the highest degree of faultless disagreement: The disagreeing speakers express contradictory propositions and judge them to hold of the same world. What allows for the disagreement to be faultless is that whether a proposition is true of a world depends on the perspective from which the proposition is assessed. In the last section of this paper, we will consider what assumptions about the relationship between a perspective, a proposition and what it represents we have to make in order to accommodate faultless disagreement in the way proposed by the propositional relativist.

*Modalizing Matters of Taste.*<sup>8</sup> Building perspectives into possible worlds gives rise to a problem.<sup>9</sup> After dinner, my friend complains about my—in her view—excessive use of garlic and remarks

(3) This dish might have tasted great.

What she wants to convey is that if the dish had had different physio-chemical properties (on account of having been prepared with a good deal less garlic), the dish would have tasted great to her. However, if the possibility-operator is understood in the usual way as an existential quantifier over all possible worlds, including those structured by other people's taste-perspectives, then (3) is true on account of, say, *my* liking lots of garlic in my food. So witnesses to (3) include worlds in which the dish tastes just as overly garlicky to my friend as it actually does. Thus, (3) comes out true for the wrong reasons.

Our two-dimensional model of taste-facts provides the means to overcome this problem. Once we have analyzed taste facts into two components, we see that there are two ways in which it is possible for a general taste fact, such as the fact that Vegemite tastes great, to obtain or fail to obtain: On the one hand, the *substratum* of the world might differ while the same perspective is brought to bear. Suppose the dish was prepared with less garlic and so was very much to my friend's liking whose taste-perspective remains as it actually is. In this case, the dish would taste great in the standard sense (3) appears to aim at. On the other hand, the taste-facts of a world might be

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<sup>8</sup>This section draws heavily on section 4.1 of my [3].

<sup>9</sup>Egan et al. [2] raise a similar difficulty for a related account.

determined by a different *perspective*. Suppose the dish had all the physiochemical properties it actually has, but that the taste-perspective brought to bear was that of a garlic-lover. This taste-perspective determines together with the—from my friend’s point of view bad-tasting—substratum that the dish tastes great.

We introduce two sets of modal notions to capture the two dimensions along which taste-facts can vary: First, we have the notion of  $s$ -possibility  $\diamond_s$  which tracks possible variations of the substratum. Second, we have the notion of  $p$ -possibility  $\diamond_p$  which tracks possible variations of the perspective.<sup>10</sup>

$\diamond_s\varphi$  is true at a world  $w = \langle s, p \rangle$  if and only if there is a substratum  $s'$  such that  $\varphi$  is true at  $w' = \langle s', p \rangle$  (i.e. if and only if  $\varphi$  is true at some world that differs from  $w$  only in virtue of its substratum).

$\diamond_p\varphi$  is true at a world  $w = \langle s, p \rangle$  if and only if there is a perspective  $p'$  such that  $\varphi$  is true at  $w' = \langle s, p' \rangle$  (i.e. if and only if  $\varphi$  is true at some world that differs from  $w$  only in virtue of its perspective).

Now when my friend utters (3) with the intended meaning suggested above, she employs the notion of  $s$ -possibility, quantifying only over possible worlds whose taste-facts are determined by her own taste-perspective: ‘That dish might have tasted great—if only you had used less garlic’. This is, I believe, the more familiar kind of possibility in connection with statements about taste. But on occasion we might have in mind the notion of  $p$ -possibility when deliberating about how something might have tasted. Consider: As a child I was made to sit through a big raw oyster session. Now when faced with a raw oyster on a half-shell I say

(4) This might have tasted great

but given my conditioning, the taste of oysters is lost on me.

Note that the apparatus introduced allows for a straightforward semantics for the operator ‘on any standard’ which some people have discussed. The statement

(5) On any standard,  $x$  tastes great

is true if and only if  $\ulcorner x$  tastes great  $\urcorner$  is true relative to every standard of taste. The semantics of this operator is the same as that of the  $p$ -necessity operator:

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<sup>10</sup>For more on these two notions of modality see my [3].

$\Box_p\varphi$  is true at a world  $w = \langle s, p \rangle$  if and only if for any perspective  $p'$ :  $\varphi$  is true at  $w' = \langle s, p' \rangle$  (i.e. if and only if  $\varphi$  is true at every world that differs from  $w$  only in virtue of its perspective).

As expected, a statement claiming that a given item is tasty on any standard is true in a perspectival world iff it is true in every perspectival world with the same substratum.

*Evaluating Taste-Beliefs and Assertions.* In the previous section we saw how statement concerning subjective matters of fact embed under modal operators. Now I want to examine how they behave in belief-contexts and how that behavior is best modeled. In addition to the apparatus introduced above, the distinction between the propositional content of a belief and the judgment on the basis of which the belief is held helps shed light on the issues cross-perspective belief-evaluation give rise to.

The indexical relativist has to work around a difficulty with *ascribing* beliefs about subjective matters of fact across perspectives. Suppose Clem correctly asserts

(6) Moira believes that Vegemite tastes great.

On a simple-minded version of the contextualist account, Clem's utterance 'Vegemite tastes great' expresses the proposition that Vegemite tastes great to Clem. But this is not what Moira believes. To properly account for cross-perspective belief-ascription, the indexical relativist has to modify the semantics of propositional attitude constructions, accommodating possible shifts between the context in which the believer sincerely expresses her beliefs and the context in which the belief-ascriber sincerely attributes these beliefs.

Factual relativists do not face that problem as statements concerning subjective matters have the same content no matter who asserts them. However, on the factual relativist account we get an analogous problem, not with *ascribing* beliefs but with *evaluating* beliefs across perspectives. Suppose, again, Clem correctly asserts (6). While he correctly characterizes the *content* of Moira's belief, it is not clear how he should *evaluate* it. What is in question here is whose perspective is relevant when evaluating a belief held by someone else. There are two salient options: The relevant perspective may be that of the assessor's or that of the believer.

Suppose the relevant perspective is the believer's. Then Clem can infer

(7) Moira believes something true

from which, together with (6), he can further infer

- (1) Vegemite tastes great.

But (1), from Clem’s perspective, is not true. We run into a parallel problem if we assume that the perspective relevant for assessing a belief held by someone with a different perspective is the assessor’s. In this case, Clem could infer

- (8) Moira believes something false

from which, together with the fact that Moira has all the relevant evidence he can infer that Moira suffers from a cognitive shortcoming: She forms a belief which is false given all the objective evidence available to her. But that appears to be an unfair assessment of Moira’s belief-forming mechanism. If anything, Clem might be justified in accusing Moira of poor taste—but certainly not for employing faulty doxastic procedures.

At the root of the problem is the failure to take into account the fact that Moira’s belief is a belief about the world as structured by *her* taste-perspective. This, as argued above, is not reflected in the *content* of the embedded sentence. The evaluation of a perspectival belief should therefore be sensitive to more than just the content of the belief.

Consider again the ascription of beliefs to agents in counterfactual situations: My “twin” who lives in a possible world in which the Matterhorn is the Alps’ highest peak believes that the Matterhorn is the Alps’ highest peak. Although what she believes is actually false, it is true of her world. When evaluating my twin’s belief, we could be interested in two different things: First, we might evaluate the propositional *content* of her belief (which is false, that is actually false). Or we might evaluate the *judgment* on the basis of which she holds the belief. Here, we have to take into consideration that she, in effect, judges the proposition the proposition in question to be true of her world. I suggest that we continue to evaluate a belief as true (false) if it is true (false) in the evaluator’s world, and that we evaluate a belief as correct (incorrect) if its propositional content is true (false) in the believer’s world—the world with respect to which the belief was formed.

Applying this distinction to beliefs about subjective matters, there are two things for us to evaluate: First, we can evaluate the propositional *content* of the belief. By default, we do so with respect to the world structured by our own perspective. Second, we can evaluate the *judgment* that underlies the belief. We do so with respect to the world structured by the believer’s perspective. Thus, when Clem evaluates Moira’s belief that

Vegemite tastes great, he ought to say that Moira believes something false but that her belief is nonetheless correct.<sup>11</sup> The same distinction applies to the cross-perspective evaluation of *assertions* concerning subjective matters: We may evaluate someone else’s taste-assertion as *true* when the assertion’s propositional content is true of our—the evaluators’—world and as *correct* when it is true of the asserter’s world.

Whether we evaluate with an eye to correctness or truth will depend on the purpose of the evaluation. If, for instance, we are interested in explaining the agent’s behavior and beliefs, we will evaluate for correctness, that is in terms of the world about which they believe and assert certain things. If, on the other hand, we want the beliefs of others to provide guidance to what is the case in our own world, we will evaluate the contents of their beliefs for truth, that is with respect to our own perspectival worlds.

The analysis given can be generalized to other areas of discourse, such as discourse about what is funny, interesting, attractive, etc. and thus allows us to account for discourse about subjective matters without giving up the standard picture of propositional truth as sensitive only to what the facts are. Further, a structurally analogous account can be given of discourse involving epistemic modals—another area which some argue requires us to relativize propositional truth. I will briefly sketch how such an account might go.

## 2 Modeling Epistemic Modality

The standard approach to the semantics of epistemic modals, *epistemic contextualism*, is a form of indexical relativism. An utterance of

(9) It might be that  $p$

in which the ‘might’ is understood as expressing epistemic possibility is construed as having the truth-conditions of

(10) What the currently relevant epistemic community knows or can come to know in relevant ways does not rule out that  $p$

where what the relevant epistemic community is differs across variations of the indexical relativist account.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Moira judges that in “her” world Vegemite tastes great, which it does.

<sup>12</sup>See DeRose [1].

This has recently been challenged.<sup>13</sup> The data which calls into question the indexical relativist account consists mainly of cases in which, when assessing an utterance like (9), we don't appear to take into account the epistemic community relevant in the context of utterance. Consider:<sup>14</sup> Sally says

(11) The Red Sox might win the game on Friday

to which Tom replies

(12) That's impossible! Their three best players have just been hospitalized with food poisoning

in response to which Sally retracts her earlier assertion:

(13) Then what I said was wrong. It is not the case that the Red Sox might win.

On the indexical relativist account<sup>15</sup> Sally has no reason to retract her assertion, for what the relevant epistemic community knew when she uttered (11) did not rule out the Red Sox' winning. If (11) was correctly interpreted along indexicalist lines, the proposition she expressed remains true, even though an utterance of (11) made *now* that she obtained additional information would express a false proposition. So either indexical relativism is false or it predicts that speakers of English are confused about the truth-conditions of some of what they say.

The propositional relativist suggests that the proposition expressed by (11) remains constant across contexts of utterance,<sup>16</sup> yet the proposition expressed receives a different truth-value depending on what context it is assessed from. Assessed relative to the context in which Sally originally uttered (11), the proposition is true. Assessed relative to the context in which Sally utters (13), and in which additional information is available, the same proposition is false.

*Modeling Epistemic Possibility.* What I take the propositional relativists' examples to show is that statements like (9) don't report *particular* epistemic facts such as the fact that as far as Sally or some other epistemic

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<sup>13</sup>See MacFarlane [7] as well as Egan et al. [2]

<sup>14</sup>See MacFarlane [7] for variations of this kind of counterexample to various kinds of indexical relativism.

<sup>15</sup>... and supposing that the relevant epistemic community consists only of Sally; if the relevant community is taken to be more comprehensive, the example would have to be adjusted.

<sup>16</sup>... modulo the reference of 'next Friday'.

community knows, the Red Sox might win. Rather, they are intended to report *general* epistemic facts. I propose that such facts be construed as perspectival, and as jointly determined by two factors: The world as it is independently of what any particular group knows on the one hand and the justified beliefs of a particular epistemic community on the other. As before, call the contribution made by the world the *substratum*, and let the *epistemic perspective* (or just *perspective*) of an epistemic community (eg that of a single believer or a group of believers) be the collection of all propositions justifiably believed by that community.<sup>17</sup>

The world simpliciter determines, we may assume, all the non-epistemic facts, the particular epistemic facts as well as what justified beliefs of a given epistemic community amount to knowledge. But it does not determine the *general* epistemic facts because it does not privilege any particular epistemic community. Again, we reconceptualize objective particular epistemic facts as subjective general epistemic facts.

*Representing Possible Worlds and Propositions.* We model possible worlds as centered on epistemic perspectives. Let  $S$  be the collection of substrata, and let  $P$  be the collection of possible epistemic perspectives, collections of propositions which may jointly be justifiably believed. For  $s \in S$  and  $p \in P$ ,  $\langle s, p \rangle$  represents the perspectival world in which the epistemic facts are determined by the substratum  $s$  and epistemic perspective  $p$ . Propositions involving epistemic modality can now be modeled as functions from possible worlds to truth values: Such a proposition is true in a world just in case the world is as the proposition represents it as being. For instance, (11) is true in a world  $\langle s, p \rangle$  just in case  $s$  and  $p$  jointly make it the case that the Red Sox might win, that is just in case the justified beliefs determined by perspective  $p$  which amount to knowledge relative to  $\langle s, p \rangle$  leave it open whether or not the Red Sox will win.

*Evaluating Epistemic Modal Assertions and Beliefs.* As in the case of assertions about matters of taste, epistemic modal assertions can be evaluated either for truth—relative to the evaluator’s epistemic perspective—or correctness—relative to the asserter’s epistemic perspective. When we evaluate an epistemic modal assertions, including an earlier assertion of our own, in the context of deliberating about what to believe and how to act given our current situation, we evaluate the assertions for truth. When evaluating such assertions in the context of deliberating about whether the assertions

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<sup>17</sup>I’m not concerned here with the question what exactly a *collective belief* (a belief held by a group of people) amounts to.

were reasonable, we evaluate the assertion for correctness.

Against this background, let us analyze the above exchange. We may assume that when Sally utters (11), none of the relevant community’s justified beliefs which amount to knowledge rule out that the Red Sox might win. Thus the world relative to which she judges that the Red Sox might win,  $\langle s_{@}, p_S \rangle$  (where  $s_{@}$  is the actual substratum and  $p_S$  is Sally’s then current epistemic perspective) is indeed one in which the Red Sox might win. Her assertion, the application of the propositional content of (11) to  $\langle s, p_S \rangle$ , is correct. Then Sally receives new information. Her epistemic perspective changes, and so do the epistemic facts in “her” world (as well as some of the non-epistemic ones; e.g. it is now a fact that Sally has received a certain additional piece of information). When receiving the new information she judges that *what* she said before is false. This amounts to the judgment that what she said then is false of the world in which the epistemic facts are determined by her current perspective. Again, while the content of (11) remains constant throughout the exchange, the facts relevant for judging whether the content correctly represents the world change. The reason Sally retracts her claim after receiving additional information is that the epistemic facts are different from the perspective from which she re-evaluates her earlier claim.

### 3 Relativism: Indexical, Propositional or Factual?

Relativists of all three varieties agree that the truth of a sentence like (1) and (11) depends on something like a perspective, say a taste-perspective or an epistemic perspective. They disagree about exactly what role the perspective plays in determining the sentence’s truth-value. *Indexical relativists* factor the perspective into the determination of the proposition expressed. *Propositional relativists* put it alongside a world, as a further parameter to which the truth of the proposition expressed is sensitive. *Factual relativists* factor it right into the world.

The problem with indexical relativism with respect to the areas of discourse discussed is that it re-interprets overtly *general* taste- or epistemic modal statements as *particular* ones and therefore both understates the force these statements are meant to have in the mouth of the speaker and fails to account for the phenomenon of faultless disagreement.<sup>18</sup>

Propositional relativism is meant to overcome these problems. But it

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<sup>18</sup>See Kölbel [5] and MacFarlane [7].

is one thing to introduce a further formal parameter and make the evaluation of propositions sensitive to it in one’s semantics. It’s another thing to explain how the additional parameter discharges its role. How are we to think of the perspective-relativity of propositional truth?<sup>19</sup> Factual relativism offers an answer. It folds the perspective into the way the world is. Different perspectives, different facts, different truth-values. In defense of their proposal, propositional relativists sometimes point to an analogy between perspectives and possible worlds: The idea that propositional truth is relative to some parameter is not in itself objectionable since even on the standard account, propositions have truth-values relative to possible worlds.<sup>20</sup> However, the analogy between possible worlds and perspectives had better not be too close, for propositional truth is relative to possible worlds because the latter determine a range of facts. If perspectives merely do more of the same work possible worlds do, then propositional truth is relative to perspectives because the *facts* are relative to a perspective and so propositional relativism reduces to factual relativism. So for propositional relativism to be distinct from factual relativism, the role of perspectives has to be construed differently. But how?

*What is Represented in Propositional Relativism.* According to the standard account, propositions are the representational contents of indicative sentences on an occasion of use and so are intimately linked with the states of affairs they represent. I will consider two options for what role perspectives might play in the propositional relativist framework and argue that neither is entirely satisfactory: On the first, propositions don’t represent any determinate states of affairs. On the second, they represent what appear to be the wrong states of affairs.

First, perspectives might select *what* state of affairs a proposition represents as obtaining. Then different facts are relevant for the evaluation of the proposition relative to different perspectives. In the case of propositions concerning matters of taste, the relevant facts are *particular* rather than *general* taste facts. For example, the fact on account of which *Vegemite*

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<sup>19</sup>Propositional relativists don’t address that question. They focus attention on what it is to *assert* a perspective-relative proposition, arguing that assertions of perspective-relative propositions are governed by essentially the same standards as the assertion of absolute propositions and so are still recognizably assertions. See Kölbel [5] and MacFarlane [8].

<sup>20</sup>Note that *this* sort of relativity does not threaten the conception of propositions as absolute in the sense intended at the beginning of the paper: The truth-value of a proposition is fixed absolutely by the facts—that is the *actual* facts. Truth-values with respect to non-actual possibilities merely fix on the representational content of the proposition.

*tastes great* is true relative to Moira’s perspective is the fact that Vegemite tastes great to Moira and the fact on account of which *Vegemite tastes great* is false relative to Clem’s perspective is the fact that Vegemite tastes awful to Clem. Here, the proposition itself does not have any determinate content: Perspectives, by selecting a particular taste fact relevant for the evaluation of the proposition, fix the representational content of the proposition. On this model, proposition and representational content are related, via perspectives, like Kaplanian character is to content via context.<sup>21</sup> This is a significant departure from the standard account of the role of propositions. As a theoretical construct, a new notion of proposition could be introduced on which propositions are not tied to fixed representational contents. But while such a notion of proposition may do useful technical work in a formal semantic theory, it would be drained of much of its intuitive content.

The second possible role perspectives might play in determining propositional truth is best introduced by analogy. Consider the pictorial representation of objects and their shapes. Material objects have objective shapes.<sup>22</sup> We may represent objects and their shapes by 2-dimensional pictures. Pictures always represent the shape of objects relative to a perspective. Suppose we want to represent the writing-surface of a particular desk, a rectangular slab of wood. What the picture looks like and whether it correctly represents the shape of the desk depends on the perspective from which the picture is supposed to represent the piece of wood. A given picture is a correct representation relative to some perspectives but an incorrect representation relative to some other perspectives. While there is an objective underlying shape which we aim at representing, we may have to distort the representing image to account for the perspective from which the shape is to be represented.

The propositional relativist may think of the facts to be represented, general taste-facts or general epistemic facts, as analogous to objective shapes. They are objective features of the world and the fact that the world has these features can be represented from different perspectives. Here, perspectives are thought to provide some kind of distorting lens which maps the propositional representation of a state of affairs onto an objective fact. For instance, Moira’s perspective maps the proposition expressed by ‘Vegemite tastes great’ onto some objective facts concerning the physio-chemical properties of Vegemite. Clem’s perspective maps the proposition expressed by ‘Vegemite does not taste great’ onto the same objective facts. The super-

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<sup>21</sup>See Kaplan [4].

<sup>22</sup>Setting aside possible worries about relativity theory.

ficially contradictory propositions both represent the same underlying facts but they do so from different perspectives, just as differently shaped images represent the same objective shape from different perspectives.

The second possible role taste- and epistemic perspectives might play in determining propositional truth, then, is analogous to the role spacial perspectives play in determining whether a shape-representation is correct. On this construal, the state of affairs a general taste proposition intuitively *appears* to represent—*Vegemite tastes great*—is not the state of affairs it actually represents—*Vegemite has physio-chemical structure xyz*. Further, some contradictory propositions—*that Vegemite tastes great* and *that Vegemite does not taste great*—represent the same state of affairs. None of this shows that propositional relativism is untenable, but it reveals how much of a departure it requires from ordinary ways of thinking about how propositions behave.

*What is Represented in Factual Relativism.* The factual relativist views matters differently. He thinks of the represented facts as *perspectival*. The proposition that Vegemite tastes great does not represent the underlying physio-chemical facts concerning Vegemite. Rather, it represents that Vegemite tastes great. This perspectival fact is jointly determined by the objective physio-chemical facts and a perspective. In the spacial analogy, this corresponds to interpreting a rhomboidal picture not as representing that a given object has such and such objective shape, but as representing that the object *looks* rhomboidal. It doesn't answer the question *what is the object's shape?*, but *how does it look?*. Similarly, the proposition that Vegemite tastes great is not meant to be an answer to the question *what is Vegemite's physio-chemical make-up?* but rather to the question *how does it taste?* These *how*-facts go beyond the underlying objective facts in that they depend on particular perspectives.<sup>23</sup>

*Concluding Remarks on Factual Relativism.* Factual relativism provides a model both for the *contents* of assertions about subjective matters and for the *states of affairs* that such assertions assert as obtaining. Both aspects offer advantages over propositional relativism. First, sentences reporting subjective matters mean what they appear to mean, and propositions play the role they were originally introduced to play. They can represent subjec-

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<sup>23</sup>Propositions expressed by sentences containing epistemic modals can be understood along the same lines: The proposition that the Red Sox might win does not represent what the relevant portion of the world itself is like—physical condition of the players, trainers' strategies, weather—but *how* it appears from a given epistemic perspective.

tive facts while abstracting away from particular perspectives, representing a particular ‘look’ the ground-level facts might have from different perspectives. Second, subjective facts are treated as facts. On the propositional relativist account, general taste facts are eliminated and general taste propositions are made true, relative to a perspective, either by particular taste facts or by facts about the physical features of the world. But from a subjective point of view, that a certain item tastes good might be as much a ‘fact’ as the fact that the earth is round and the fact that two plus two equals four. Factual relativism makes available a level of analysis at which a wide range of what appear to be facts can be treated as facts, while at the same time providing the means to model the difference between objective and subjective facts in a way that traces the intuitive distinction.<sup>24</sup>

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