

NEW AGE RELATIVISM AND EPISTEMIC POSSIBILITY: THE QUESTION OF EVIDENCE¹

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I Preliminary remarks

What I am calling New Age Relativism is usually proposed as a thesis about the truth-conditions of *utterances*, where an utterance is an actual historic voicing or inscription of a sentence of a certain type. Roughly, it is the view that, for certain discourses, whether an utterance is true depends not just on the context of its making—when, where, to whom, by whom, in what language, and so on—and the “circumstances of evaluation”—the state of the world in relevant respects—but also on an additional parameter: *a context of assessment*. Vary the latter 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.

New Age Relativism is interesting for at least three reasons. First, it presents as a sober, semi-technical thesis in the philosophy of language, drawing essentially on an apparatus of semantic theory fashioned in the well-tried Lewis-Kaplan tradition, and marks an attempt to articulate one of the oldest, most enigmatic tendencies in philosophy in a sharply formulated theoretical framework. This is in refreshing contrast to the rhetorical and impressionistic style of much of the writing of contemporary postmodernism. Second, its motivation, at least in some cases, is empirico-linguistic. Traditionally, relativism about truth has been a metaphysical view, driven by ideas about the limits of the objective world, or the illusoriness of any aspiration to purely representational thought. Its re-emergence as a form of semantic theory, by contrast, has been fostered in large part by considerations about the ways in which, supposedly, relevant areas of language actually work. New Age Relativism allows, it is alleged, of a solid motivation in local data of linguistic practice, rather than antecedent metaphysics or postmodernist party doctrine.²

¹ This discussion is in many ways complementary to—and indeed originated as part of—my (forthcoming). While self-contained, it may be an easier read for someone familiar with the latter.

² The picture is mixed. Certainly this has been the pattern of argument with epistemic modals, knowledge ascriptions, and conditionals. It is different with John MacFarlane's attempts to provide a stage-setting for a

Third, the framework proposed easily provides for *local* relativisms. Many of the traditional reasons for dismissing relativism have turned on singularities that erupt when it aspires to be a global doctrine, (thereby applying in particular to its own very statement.³) But the New Age framework makes provision from the start for the idea that ‘context of assessment’ may be an idle wheel in the determination of truth-value for some —perhaps even most—kinds of claim.

Locality of concern has been the norm in the recent literature. Besides the traditional relativistic stamping-grounds of ethics, aesthetics, and taste,⁴ New Age relativistic proposals have recently been advanced in a locally specific way for indicative conditionals,⁵ future contingents,⁶ ascriptions of knowledge,⁷ and for epistemic possibility claims.⁸ The latter is the most well-developed and widely discussed example in the recent literature and will provide the main example for the discussion to follow, though our overarching concern will be equally with the general methodology of the debates—specifically, with the sufficiency in principle of the models of linguistic evidence for relativism that have been appealed to.

II The basic linguistic case for the assessment-relativity of epistemic possibility claims

Here is what has become a stock example, given by John MacFarlane:⁹

- t₁ Sue: “Bill could be in Boston”
 Ted: “Actually, I just saw him board a flight to Houston”
 t₂ Sue: “Oh. Then I was wrong”.

cogent expression of the Aristotelian Open Future (MacFarlane 2003a and forthcoming.) And the principal spur to relativistic treatments of ethical and aesthetic discourse remains the antecedent (folk-) philosophical idea that these are areas of (potential) faultless disagreement—areas where *prima facie* genuinely contradictory opinions may be held without error on either side. See e.g. Lasersohn (2004) on this with respect to taste and, for a similar direction with respect to predicates like “rich”, Richard (2004). Wright (2006) is a general discussion of the idea of faultless disagreement and ways of handling it. See also MacFarlane (2006a)

³ Thus the traditional debate following the discussion in the *Theaetetus*. The modern contributions to the *Theaetetus* debate include Jordan (1971), Meiland (1977) and (1979), Seigel (1986), and Swoyer (1982).

⁴ Kolbel (2002), Lasersohn (2004), Stephenson (2005).

⁵ Weatherson (2006).

⁶ MacFarlane (2003a) and (forthcoming).

⁷ MacFarlane (2005a).

⁸ MacFarlane (2003) and (2006b), Egan-Hawthorne-Weatherson (2004), Egan (2005), Stephenson (2005).

⁹ MacFarlane (2003)

MacFarlane, for one, finds this an entirely plausible piece of dialogue, and he thinks we should take Sue's t_2 utterance very seriously, as an intended *retrospective retraction*. Thus interpreted, Sue's t_2 utterance contrasts with what she would be doing if, after Ted's observation, she were to affirm:

t_2^* "Then that's wrong – he can't be in Boston",

in which the rider suggests that what she now wants to distance herself from is merely the proposition that *would* be affirmed by a present— t_2 —affirmation of a token of her t_1 -utterance type. No doubt Sue is doing this in the original scenario as well. But in MacFarlane's view she is there properly understood as doing more. For it would, in his view, be "odd and unnatural" if Sue were to continue,

t_2^* (continued) "—although when I said, "Bill might be in Boston," what I said was true, and I stand by that claim."

MacFarlane comments,

... it seems to me that th[is] alternative continuation, on which [a speaker] stands by her original claim, *always* sounds wrong. We simply don't have the practice of standing by old claims of epistemic possibility in the face of new knowledge. We *could have* had this practice, but as things are, we just don't talk this way.¹⁰

Suppose for now that this suggestion is agreed. Why is the dialogue *prima facie* evidence of assessment-relativity? MacFarlane's strategy is to canvass various possible accounts of the truth-conditions of epistemic possibility claims, including an assessment-relative account, and then to argue that—with the exception of the latter—they variously stumble over the above and other aspects of the linguistic evidence. Here are three possible non-relativistic accounts he considers:

Simple: "It might be the case that P" is true as uttered by S at t iff. P is compatible with everything S knows at t.

Complex: "It might be the case that P" is true as uttered by S at t iff. P is compatible with everything known or knowable via some *envisaged class of methods* by any member of C's *conversational circle* at t.¹¹

Universal: "It might be the case that P" is true as uttered by S at t iff (i) no-one knows that not-P at t, and (ii) there is no way in which anyone can come to know that not-P.

The problem with *Simple* is that it cannot account for Sue's self-correction in the stock example. If it were correct, then her t_1 remark would have been true just in case Bill's then being in Boston was consistent with everything she knew at the time of utterance. Since—we may suppose—the

¹⁰ MacFarlane (2003), ts. p. 4.

¹¹ This is broadly in the spirit of DeRose (1991).

only thing she knows inconsistent with that is what Ted subsequently told her, *Simple* predicts that she will “stand by” the former claim. It is just that it can no longer be made using the same form of words.

The same point presumably scotches any broadly utterance-contextualist account of epistemic possibility claims—any account which holds that the truth-conditions of “It could be that P” vary with the context of utterance (in ways not accounted for by such variation in the truth-conditions of P.) Any such account will struggle to explain retrospective correction phenomena of the kind illustrated by the stock example: why, on the basis of evidence which stops me from truthfully asserting a token of the sentence type P *now* should I withdraw another earlier token of the same type if the type concerned is indexical, or otherwise utterance-context sensitive, and the contents of the two tokens are correspondingly different?

Complex looks to do better with self-correction data. Ted is presumably part of Sue’s conversational circle. So when Sue makes her t_1 epistemic possibility claim, what she asserts is hostage to Ted’s state of information at the time. Ted knows that Bill isn’t in Boston. So what Sue said was false—just as she correctly says at t_2 . Moreover *Complex* will also handle the following dialogue:

t_1 Sue: “Bill could be in Boston”

Ted (Bill’s PA): “Wait a minute. I’ll just check his itinerary and see.”
He thumbs through his filofax, “Ah, no. He was scheduled to board a flight to Houston five minutes ago.”

t_2 Sue: “Oh. Then I was wrong”.

This time, Ted does not *already* know something inconsistent with the embedded content in Sue’s claim. But her claim is nevertheless hostage— assuming that it is common knowledge that Ted is privy to Bill’s schedule —to the information that is accessible to him in certain foreseeable ways. That it is so is confirmed by her self-correction. (Of course, this dialogue is entirely fictional. But it seems likely that someone who shares MacFarlane’s intuitions about the original case will find this conversation natural and convincing as well.)

However, *Complex* cannot, it appears, account for examples like these:

- (a) June is an FBI agent who is carrying out surveillance on Bill and his circle, and is using a remote listening device to monitor Sue’s and Ted’s conversation. She overhears Sue’s t_1 remark and says to herself: “That woman is wrong: I just saw the guy board a flight to Houston”
- (b) Ted is not Bill’s PA. He has no known or foreseeable special (access to) information about Bill’s movements. But as Sue speaks, he happens to notice a piece of notepaper in the trash can in Bill’s handwriting – he picks it out and finds it is Bill’s itinerary for the coming week with HOUSTON clearly marked against the present date. He immediately corrects Sue. And Sue responds with a retrospective self-correction as before.

If the patterns of discourse represented by these fables are intuitive and correct, it appears that *Complex* too gets the truth-conditions of epistemic possibility claims wrong.

Universal, for its part, has no difficulty in accommodating all these “data”. According to *Universal*, an utterance of “It might be that P” is false whenever anyone at all, whether or not within the ‘conversational circle’ of the utterer, either does or can (in the actual world) come to know that not-P. So it predicts the appropriateness of Sue’s self-correction when Ted utterly fortuitously comes to know not-P. And it also predicts the propriety of June’s eavesdropping correction of Sue. But it is obviously independently objectionable. In effect, it demands of a justified assertion of “It might be the case that P” that the assertor have evidence that no-one knows, or can get to know, otherwise. This is much too strong and would outlaw many perfectly justified epistemic possibility claims. For instance, in order to justifiably assert that there could be an even number of words in this paper, you would need to be in position to claim that no-one can know that the number is odd—and hence in position to claim that it isn’t.

MacFarlane’s preferred proposal, by contrast, is this:

Relative: “It might be the case that P” is true as uttered by S at t *and assessed by A at t'* iff P is compatible with everything A knows at t'.

And this seems to cope with all the ‘data’. In each of the examples, an assessor—Sue herself after Ted’s sighting of Bill boarding the Houston flight, Sue again after Bill checks his filofax, Sue once more after Ted finds the piece of paper in the trash can, and FBI agent June—is in an information-state at a relevant t' which empowers her to assess Sue’s t₁ utterance as false if its truth-conditions are as *Relative* proposes. So the conclusion is invited that *Relative* correctly captures the truth-conditions of epistemic possibility claims, whose truth should therefore be conceived as relative to a context of assessment, understood as including a variable for shifts in information.

III Six sets of issues and misgivings

(i) Is the correction datum authentic?

Linguistic “intuition”—what we find it smooth and normal, or alternatively “odd and unnatural” to say—is notoriously slippery ground. Is the correction datum authentic? I know from experience that many (including non-philosophers) find it so in a wide range of examples. But I think there may be an explanation of that, which I will touch on shortly, which neutralises the suggested evidential force of the datum. In any case the invited assessment-relativist interpretation of the stock example tends to stifle another linguistic ‘intuition’ which you may find

you have – a sense that it would be perfectly proper for Sue to continue the first dialogue by saying: “But he might have been in Boston, for all I knew before.” Such a response *does* seem on the face of it to amount to “standing by an old claim of epistemic possibility”. So we need to be clearer what the relevant “old claims” that we allegedly don’t stand by amount to.

It is a platitude that knowledge admits of growth and decay. That requires that the verb “to know” has a significant tense: it can be true that I once didn’t know P but do now; and that I once knew P but don’t anymore. So presumably—given that it’s not *totally* wrong-headed to think of epistemic possibility as somehow intimately related to compatibility with knowledge—the same will go for epistemic possibility: the epistemic “might” or “could” will also allow of a significant tense. How, then, are the “old claims of epistemic possibility” which we allegedly don’t “stand by” to be understood as tensed?

Well, if they are to be the *very same claims* as were formerly made, then the appropriate way for Sue to express her former claim at the point of the alleged retraction should presumably involve recasting it in the past tense. At t_2 Sue ought to be repudiating a claim that she can then express by saying that it *was* epistemically possible at t_1 for Bill to be in Boston. If so, my sense, at least, is that this is nothing she should want to repudiate, and indeed that it is just what she would affirm by “but he could have been, for all I knew before.” It is true of course that the form of utterance, “For all I know/knew, P”, is not committal to the truth of P—Sue might equally well say: “but for all knew, he *was* in Boston.” So one attracted to a relativist response to the datum might be inclined to grant the propriety of “but he could have been, for all I knew before”, and then to contest whether this really amounts to an endorsement of the “old epistemic possibility claim” seemingly expressed by the words before the comma. But I think it would also be perfectly smooth and natural for Sue to say simply, “Oh, so he can’t be in Boston then – but when I said what I did, he *could/might have been*.”

I alluded above to an alternative explanation of the correction datum. It is that the pattern of exchange illustrated by the stock example does not involve correction of an epistemic possibility claim at all, but of something more like a tentative assertion, or some form of placement upon the “conversational record”, of the embedded proposition. There is no doubt that “it may be that P” and cognates are sometimes used to effect a tentative endorsement of P, with roughly the effect of: there is (for present purposes) a significant likelihood that P, or: we need, for present purposes, to work on the assumption that P. Think of the natural setting for remarks like “I might be late – don’t wait for me”, “Iran could already have nuclear weapons”, “That dog looks as if it might bite”, “Sri Lanka might still get that total”. It does not matter for the point whether this kind of lodging, or quasi-endorsement of the embedded proposition is best viewed as

a (frequent) implicature of the assertion of an epistemic modal, or whether it signals rather a semantically different—illocutionary—role for words and phrases which also function as epistemic modal operators.¹² The point is that a tacit familiarity with this aspect of their use would be enough to trigger a sense of the propriety of Sue’s retrospective self-correction, once it turns out that Bill is not in Boston.

To screen this possibility off, we need to construct a case where it is clear that there is no kind of tentative endorsement of the embedded P and that what is being asserted really is just the epistemic possibility claim. As an approximation, try this. Ted is about to head off to the wood-stack, chainsaw in hand, wearing just shorts, sandals and a T-shirt. He is reasonably experienced, and chainsaw accidents are anyway pretty unusual but tend to be horrific when people are not wearing the proper protective clothing. Sue says, “Please don’t use that without wearing the proper gear. You could get horribly injured.” Insouciant, Ted replies, “I’ll be fine.” Later he returns, having cut many logs, pleased with himself and uninjured. He says, “See, I was just fine.” Which is the more natural continuation for Sue:

“Oh, then I was wrong”, or

“You are a damn fool. You could have been horribly hurt” ?

Relative predicts Sue’s retrospective self-correction in the stock example. But it also predicts self-correction in the chainsaw example. And here, I think, we will side, rather with Sue’s second response than with the first.¹³

(ii) *Assessments based on ignorance and knowledge-loss.*

Richard Dietz may have been the first to place emphasis upon an apparent asymmetry illustrated by the following kind of case.¹⁴ At t_0 Sue discovers a (genuine) proof of Goldbach’s Conjecture. Later, Ted, unaware if this, says

t_1 Ted: “There may be counterexamples to Goldbach”

¹² MacFarlane considers something like this suggestion in sections 4.1-4.3 of his (2006b) and points up some of the obvious problems with any attempt to construe the locutions we are concerned with as force-modifiers in general (for instance, the standard Frege-Geach type- point that it is possible to subordinate the clauses in question under negation and the conditional and other operators.) But my suggestion is not that what we erroneously take to be epistemic modal operators are in fact markers of illocutionary force: it is rather that the cases when the correction datum seems most intuitive are cases where the words in question *do* play that role — whether instead of or additional to (perhaps as a pragmatic implicature of) functioning as modal operators is another issue.

¹³ No doubt the example allows interpretation in such a way that the modalities involved are alethic rather than epistemic. But to discount it, we would have to argue that it does *not* allow an epistemic possibility interpretation except at the cost of distortion of linguistic practice. That seems wrong.

¹⁴ The example is from my NYU graduate seminar of Fall 2005.

t₁ Sue, excitedly: “You are wrong: It couldn’t be that Goldbach has a counterexample”

Sue’s response is mandated by the consequence of *Relative* that

“It is not the case that it might be the case that P” is true as uttered by S at t and assessed by A at t' iff it is not the case that: P is compatible with everything A knows at t'.

However, later Sue accidentally throws out her handwritten notes and her hard-drive crashes. Distraught, she suffers a stress-induced amnesia and forgets the whole episode. In a subsequent conversation, she says

t₂ Sue: “It might be that there are counterexamples to Goldbach”.

t₂ Ted: “But you told me a while ago that there couldn’t be!”

t₃ Sue: “Then I was wrong”.

Sue’s t₂ claim is also apparently mandated by *Relative*, given her state of information at that time. And since the information Bill then gives her, about her t₁ remark to him, leaves her total state of information still compatible with there being counterexamples to Goldbach, *Relative*—so says the objection—predicts the propriety of her self-correction at t₃. Obviously one has to correct the negation of an epistemic possibility claim if one is forced to regard the claim itself as true. Sue’s t₂ claim is mandated by her t₂ knowledge and *Relative*. Since Bill’s remark gives her nothing to change that mandate, the t₃ correction is forced. But, without additional information—for instance, her recollection of the proof and discovery of a flaw in it—the self-correction seems bizarre and premature.

MacFarlane agrees that this kind of case counterexemplifies *Relative*. He writes that,

“If epistemic possibility is perspectival, this data [sic] suggests, it is asymmetrically perspectival. The truth of epistemic modal claims can depend on what is known by the assessor, but only if the assessor knows more than the original assertor. Taking this asymmetry into account complicates the relativist account considerably....”¹⁵

However he has a suggestion about the kind of complication that is required. What is needed, he believes, is to pool the information of assertor and assessor, so that we have a clause e.g. like this:¹⁶

¹⁵ MacFarlane (2006b), ms. p. 53.

¹⁶ The formulations following are my own gloss on MacFarlane’s suggestions. (*Relative*** is less permissive than *Relative**—it will exclude possibilities that P where it takes the combined epistemic achievement of S and A to rule out P.)

*Relative**: “It might be the case that P” is true as uttered by S at t and assessed by A at t' iff P is compatible with everything A knows at t' and with everything S knows at t,

or this:

*Relative***: “It might be the case that P” is true as uttered by S at t and assessed by A at t' iff P is compatible with everything A would know at t' if he added to what he actually knows at t' everything that S knows at t (and then exploited the combined resources perfectly rationally, etc.)

These proposals will certainly address the immediate problem. While Sue is still straightforwardly empowered at t_1 to correct Ted's t_1 remark just on the basis of her own knowledge at the time, her t_3 correction is premature—on either account, she needs to know more about her knowledge state at t_1 , just as seems intuitive.

But now there are other, related problems. Suppose Bill thinks that he has found the first proof of Goldbach's Conjecture, and joins in the conversation at t_1 :

t_1 Ted: “There may be counterexamples to Goldbach”

t_1 Sue, excitedly: “You are wrong: It couldn't be that Goldbach has a counterexample”

t_1 Bill, complacently: “Yes, it couldn't be that Goldbach has a counterexample. In fact it was I who found the proof—it is already on the way to the publisher.”

Bill is wrong—his proof is a muddle—but Sue believes he has anticipated her and that she will never now get any credit. Bitterly, she later shreds her hand written notes and wipes her hard-drive. Then, distraught, she suffers a stress-induced amnesia and forgets the whole episode. In a subsequent conversation, she says

t_2 Sue: “It might be that there are counterexamples to Goldbach”.

t_2 Ted: “But you and Bill both told me a while ago that there couldn't be!”

t_3 Sue: “Then we were both wrong”.

It seems clear that though bizarre as before, Sue's t_3 evaluation does at least have the merit of consistency, for she and Bill intuitively made the same claim, just as Ted reports, of which competence now demands a uniform evaluation. But both *Relative** and *Relative*** ascribe different truth-conditions to Sue's and Bill's respective t_1 claims. Both require that Sue should evaluate the two claims differently, since her t_3 knowledge pooled with her t_1 knowledge does rule out counterexamples to Goldbach, whereas her t_3 knowledge pooled with Bill's t_1 knowledge does not. So, if *Relative** or *Relative*** is to be believed, the truthful thing for her to say at t_3 is

t_3 Sue: “Actually, I was right. But Bill was wrong”.

This is obviously completely unintuitive.

There may be a temptation to think that what this shows is that a clause is wanted which allows Sue's t_3 evaluation to pool her present knowledge with both hers *and* Bill's former knowledge—an analogue of the play with “conversational circle” involved in *Complex*, but this time within the framework of assessment-relativity. However I do not think the relativist should be tempted towards such epicycles—rather the original objection is misconceived, and MacFarlane was wrong to sustain it. For it simply isn't true that *Relative* enforces assessments based on ignorance or knowledge-loss to trump the epistemic possibility claims of agents who know or knew more. Reflect that what is *outré* about these assessments is not so much the idea that they might be true. It is not as if we want to say that the mere fact that someone knows not P is tout court sufficient for anyone else's claim that it could be that P to be false. What jars is rather the apparent *presumption* of the assessor—their taking themselves to be in position to correct the claim of someone who, for all they know, may be better placed. But *Relative* does not enforce such presumption. To see this suppose a community in which, as for us, testimony is conceived as a source of knowledge, but whose members are mutually known never to make mistakes or to lie, at least on matters of the kind with which the proposition that P is concerned, and whose assessments of epistemic possibility claims are, again mutually knowledgeable, governed by *Relative*. Imagine that you are a member of this community and rightly judge that P is consistent with everything you know. Taking yourself as both speaker and assessor, you accordingly know that an utterance by you of “It is possible that P” would express a truth. Now you learn that Sue, a member of your community, has asserted, “It could not be that P”.¹⁷ By hypothesis, this will be a knowledgeable assertion, so you learn that P is not consistent with the knowledge-base of another member of your community—and hence that there is something to be known, not yet known to you, which rules out the truth of P. This existential claim is itself inconsistent with the truth of P. And it is now something that you know. So you are no longer in position to assess your hypothetical utterance of “It is possible that P” as expressing a truth, nor accordingly to correct Sue's more knowledgeable claim.

This reasoning makes idealising assumptions about the practices of members of the community concerned. But they are assumptions that do no more than hypothesise the attainment of standards to which we actually aspire. If *Relative* is correct and tacitly accepted, then what one learns when another sincerely denies an epistemic possibility claim is that they judge their information to rule out the embedded proposition. Lacking special reason to think the denial insincere, or incompetent, one should be receptive to the idea that one has just learned that there

¹⁷ —and let's prescind from any issues about ascertaining that what she intended was an *epistemic* possibility claim.

is information to be had sufficient to rule out P. So one is in no position reasonably to judge that all one's knowledge is consistent with P.

I conclude that, whatever its other difficulties, *Relative* does not have an “ignorant-assessor” problem.

(iii) *Other Counterexamples*

But there are more obvious, potentially no less serious problems. Granted that there is a range of cases where the kind of correction required by *Relative* does seem intuitive—and prescinding from the explanation suggested above of these cases (that they in effect involve correction of P)—*Relative* seems massively to over-predict our propensities to correction of epistemic modals. Suppose Sue has just bought a £1.50 ticket in the Euro-millions Super Draw. Ted tells her she is wasting her money.

t₁ Sue: “Not at all. I might win”

Later the draw takes place. Sue does not win.

t₂ Ted: “See. I told you so”

It would be, it seems to me—assuming Sue has no further relevant information—completely inappropriate if she were to reply,

(a) t₂ Sue: “Yes, I guess I was wrong. It wasn't true that I might win”

and perfectly natural if she answered instead,

(b) t₂ Sue: “That's just hindsight. It's still true that I might have won”

MacFarlane considers this kind of example.¹⁸ His response is not to dispute the naturalness of the kind of dialogue that ends with Sue's remark (b), but to dispute whether the modality involved is epistemic, rather than alethic. I have no space here to consider the grounds on which he tries to make this plausible, but I don't think it is. The naturalness of the dialogue depends on treating Sue's remark (b) as a reaffirmation, modulo an appropriate shift of mood and tense, of the possibility she affirmed at t₁.¹⁹ So if the possibility affirmed by her remark (b) is alethic, so is that

¹⁸ Cf. Ian Hacking (1967). MacFarlane responds in section 8.1 of his (2006b).

¹⁹ Compare: “Why don't you open up the barbecue to anyone who happens to be around?”
 “That wouldn't be a sensible idea—strangers might cause problems.”
 and “Why didn't you open up the barbecue to anyone who happened to be around?”
 “That wouldn't have been a sensible idea—strangers might have caused problems.”
 (I intend the play with ‘strangers’ to grease interpretation of the modality involved in the example as epistemic.)

affirmed by her t_1 response to Ted. But the alethic possibilities at t_1 are presumably no news to Ted. What Sue is telling him at t_1 is that he doesn't know that she is going to lose.

But let us put the particular example to one side and step back. *Relative* requires that any epistemic possibility claim be assessed as false, no matter when it is made or from what state of information it issues, by any assessor who happens to know that the embedded claim is false, no matter what her social context. It respects no limits of distance in time and space between utterer and assessor. It is natural to suppose that as knowledge advances, the domain of epistemic possibility shrinks. Not so according to *Relative*, which mandates that we regard the space of epistemic possibilities open to our pre-Darwinian, pre-Newtonian, pre-Daltonian ancestors as no wider than ours. If *Relative* is right, we should believe that they were mistaken even in taking their various false theories of things to be epistemic possibilities. But this is not what we think.

(iv) How in any case can mere patterns of correction motivate assessment-relativism?

Even if the correction data were solid and general, there would still be something puzzling about the relativistic response. After all, we go in for correction of *all kinds* of claims, both our own previous utterances and those of others. Is it being suggested that all of them are apt material for assessment-relative semantics? Can it really be that the mere phenomenon of change of mind under altering information already provides all that is needed to motivate the view? Presumably not. But then what is the difference in the present case? What is the extra datum, or background consideration, that makes the difference?

Well, the correction data disfavour—let's allow—each of *Simple*, *Complex* and *Universal*. If *Relative* were the only other possible account, that would certainly be a relevant “background consideration”. But that surely isn't so. There will be no end of accounts that, like the three MacFarlane discards, diverge from each other by variously widening and restricting, as some kind of function of the context of utterance,²⁰ the information base with which the proposition embedded in the claim of possibility has to be consistent if the claim is to be true. So it would need to be made plausible that *no* such account is likely to be able to accommodate the correction data before the latter could emerge as accredited by default. The strategy of motivating an assessment-relativist account by elimination thus looks a little desperate, particularly when for reasons already reviewed and some to follow, *Relative* itself looks to be in difficulty with certain of the *prima facie* data of linguistic practice.

The reason, I surmise, why MacFarlane and others have been impressed by the correction data is because they are already seeing the landscape as one in which assessment-relativism is to

²⁰ *Universal* can be thought of as a limiting case of this.

compete with contextualism, and because, as we remarked earlier, the correction data, unchallenged, surely are anomalous for any view on which the content of the original utterance at the time of utterance and the content of a tokening of the same type at the time of assessment are different. When Sue learns that Bill is on the flight to Houston, she comes—according to the face-value reading of the datum—to be in position to deny that it is possible that he is in Boston. But that is not to have any ground whatever to criticise her former utterance unless it claimed or implied otherwise. If, as on a standard contextualist account, the relevant information base shifts with the context of utterance, that won't in general be so.

Well and good. But the evident problem is that we—all of us, all of the time—routinely discard erstwhile-justified opinions about all kinds of subject matters in the light of altering information. In order to distinguish the case from one of that routine kind—in order for the example to provide any motivation at all to start thinking of the truth of epistemic possibility claims as context-of-assessment relative,—there has to be, I suggest, some kind of *additional* evidence, over and above the correction data, that Sue's claim at t_1 was *also* perfectly proper—and this not just in the sense of having been justified when she made it, but *true*. It is *truth* that has to vary with context of assessment: that thesis is the heart and soul of relativism. So unless there is manifest in our linguistic practice, even after the allegedly perfectly proper correction at t_2 , some way in which speakers can give expression to the correctness of Sue's earlier t_1 claim, there can be – or so a critic should charge – absolutely no call for a truth-relativistic response to the alleged linguistic data. We should conclude merely that Sue simply made an epistemic possibility claim at t_1 that, at t_2 , she recognises to have been incorrect. She was just wrong before.

It is actually difficult to envisage what shape a dialogue that was assessment-relativism suggestive on this crucial point might take if the correction datum is to be part of it. The very aspect—the apparent *retrospective* self-correction—that makes the problem for a contextualist account seems, in fact, to be equally awkward for relativism. After all, Sue precisely *doesn't* merely say, “Oh, then that's wrong—he can't be in Boston.” If she did, she could be interpreted merely as re-assessing the content of her previous remark from her present assessment-standpoint, and she could perhaps then add — in an assessment-relativism suggestive way—something like “But when I said he could be just now, I was right”. But MacFarlane, as noted, emphatically believes that we do not speak in the latter way where epistemic modals are concerned, and he thinks that is a crucial piece of evidence against assessment-relativism's rivals. By saying, “*I was* wrong”, Sue goes beyond merely re-assessing the truth-value of the content of her previous remark: she affirms it had a status when made which is inconsistent with her adding

now that “When I said he could be, I was right”. If she could add the latter, the case would be no different to that of this dialogue:

t₁ Sue (excitedly, on the TGV): “Look, there is an Alpine hare!”

Ted (opens his eyes slowly and sleepily looks out of the carriage window):
“Actually, there isn’t any hare.”

t₂ Sue: “Oh, how irritating you are—of course there is none now, but when I said that there was an Alpine hare, I was right”,

which involves nothing more mysterious than routine indexicality of content. Hence, again, the force of the correction datum against contextualism. However the latter addition is just what assessment-relativity *also* seems to predict should be acceptable. *Relative* allows that the original utterance of “Bill could be in Boston”, when assessed from the same context as that of its original utterance, expressed a truth—and that what that utterance expressed is the *same proposition* as expressed by the same words on the later occasion of assessment. It is therefore actually very *bad* for relativism that Sue says that she *was* wrong. What she should be doing is somehow evincing the assessment that the content concerned is wrong now while simultaneously conceding merit to her former opinion about it in the context in which she held it—and merit, moreover, somehow contrasting with mere (defeasible) justifiability.

The simple point is that the kind of linguistic patterns which would advantage an assessment-relative account of truth in some region of discourse over both contextualist and invariantist alternatives are actually *compromised* by the stock correction data, rather than (partially) composed by it. What is required is some kind of evidence of *co-variation* of truth-value with variation of assessment-contextual parameters. That is just what is obstructed by retrospective correction, taken at face value.

(v) *What about the Eavesdropping component in the data?*

We have so far paid no attention to one aspect of the data that has moved proponents of relativism—the intuition, apparently shared by significantly many commentators,²¹ of the propriety of corrections of epistemic modal claims by arbitrary non-participants in the conversation in which they are made. Since *Universal* is hopeless, any non-relativistic account of the truth-conditions of epistemic possibility claims is presumably going to interpret them as answerable to the knowledge of some determinate but less than all-embracing population of thinkers. However this population will presumably be variable—it is not, presumably, fixed once

²¹ See especially Egan-Hawthorne-Weatherson (2004).

and for all and independently of context, just who among all possible thinkers needs to be ignorant of P if an utterance of “It could be that P” is to be true. This is what makes it natural to seek a further analysis using contextualist resources. But how could any systematic account of a broadly contextualist kind possibly get the truth-conditions right if any such claim is open to proper correction by an arbitrary, fortuitously well-informed eavesdropper? The FBI agent, June, demurs perfectly naturally and properly—or so it is alleged—from Sue’s claim that Bill could be in Boston. As a competent speaker, Sue should have at least an implicit understanding of the population to whose information states her remark is answerable if it does indeed allow of some contextualist or invariantist account. Yet surely she cannot plausibly have intended her claim to be answerable to June’s, or any other eavesdropper’s information. If it is correctly corrigible by someone who merely overhears it, that is surely strong evidence that no such account can be correct.²²

As always, there is some room for manoeuvre. There is a thought about such cases which would reconcile them with a broad contextualism even if we treat them as normal and proper corrections of an epistemic modal: the thought that, by eavesdropping upon a conversation, one in effect *muscles in on it*—places oneself in the relevant conversational circle—even if unbeknownst to the other participants. If that is allowed, then an account along the lines of *Complex*:

“It might be the case that P” is true as uttered by S at t iff. P is compatible with everything known or knowable via some *envisaged class of methods* by any member of C’s *conversational circle* at t,

perhaps modified to include additional references to what members of C’s conversational circle might easily come to know, and to what they would be negligent not to come to know, will have no problem coping with any of eavesdroppers, fortuitously available bits of information in trash cans, or indeed with the range of apparent counterexamples to *Simple* (which I won’t discuss further here) where an epistemic possibility claim is rebuffed on the ground that the assertor “should have known better”.

More important, however, is the point that even if *Relative* predicts the propriety of eavesdropping corrections—and even supposing no otherwise not implausible invariantist or contextualist account does so—it doesn’t predict the full range of endorsements and corrections that eavesdroppers, and overhearers more generally, go in for. Suppose I am an Umpire during a

²² Of course the point requires, once again, that the data of correction by eavesdropping is robust, and that it really is the epistemic modal claim that is corrected and not, for example, some form of qualified assertion of P, or its placement upon a conversational record. Notice that it would not be enough to defeat the latter suggestion that eavesdropping June is not party to Sue’s conversation—she doesn’t need to be to find fault with what Sue places on the record.

weekend of war games. A platoon of the Blue Force is inching its way on their bellies up a slight depression in a field. Their sergeant says, “Keep down... there could be Red snipers on the ridge.” I know better—they have picked the best possible line of approach and would not be visible from the actual Red positions even if they stood up and ran. But I regard the sergeant’s order, and his explanation of it, as correct—he is playing well. Indeed, suppose I am the sergeant and happen to know the lay of the land and the actual disposition of the Reds. Still, I am training my men and it is important that they learn to cover all possibilities and act accordingly. So I say to one who is about to stand up, “What are you thinking of? There could be Red snipers on the ridge.”²³

Such examples illustrate a phenomenon of what we may term *assessment-deference*: sometimes an assessor of an epistemic modal claim will defer to the information of an audience, or a third party, and endorse the claim (or not) on that basis, rather than in the light of his own information. This is still consistent with a more relaxed form of assessment-relativism—one whereby an assessment offered in a particular context may be conditioned, perhaps at the discretion of the assessor, by a value of the relevant assessment-parameter other than that obtaining at the context of assessment, in deference to the situation of an audience or some other salient agent(s). But it would be a bold claim that, once a proponent of *Relative* sets off on such a path of epicycles and pragmatic complication, no descendant of *Complex* is going to be able to cope as well.

Someone might be tempted to deny that the deferential assessments provide examples of literal, sincere endorsement. I might, as sergeant, just be telling my men a ‘white lie’ when I say, “There might be Red snipers on the ridge”, with a view to enhancing the training experience. Or I might, as Umpire, regard the sergeant’s order as correct only in the sense that it is the order that he ought to give: what is true is not that there might be Red snipers on the ridge, but only that he and his men ought to think that there might. These are both things that a proponent of assessment-relativism can say. But *Relative* needs to be independently well entrenched before it can be acceptable methodology to dispute, or explain away as loose or misleading, those patterns of speech that seem to contradict it. There are similar ways of discounting the original correction data, after all.

(vi) *Embedded epistemic modals*

²³ Examples of this kind were emphasised to me by Herman Cappelen in conversation in September 2006. They were also central in a talk given by John Hawthorne at an Arché *Basic Knowledge* workshop in November 2006.

This is the final issue for the present discussion. Epistemic modals operators allow of occurrences within the scope of other operators, like tenses—as we already emphasised—and indeed other epistemic operators. Consider for example some effectively but tediously decidable proposition, Q —say that $10^{27} + 1$ is a prime. For all I know, you know that $10^{27} + 1$ is not a prime and hence are in position to assess “It is epistemically possible that Q ” as false. Since—for assessment-relativism—there is no indexicality in that sentence, it seems that (the relativist should allow that) for all I know, you know that it is not epistemically possible that Q . We now make two plausible assumptions:

(1): If a theory of epistemic possibility permits the competent assertion of a conjunction of the following form (the *proscribed* form)

$A \ \& \ EP[\text{not-}A],$

it is in trouble.

The justified admission of an epistemic possibility cannot cohabit with a justified assertion that it does not obtain. This is a feature that distinguishes epistemic possibility from metaphysical and other forms of possibility. The point is easily substantiated if assertion is subject to the knowledge rule, for in that case by asserting A one implicitly lays claim to the knowledge which, by asserting the epistemic possibility of $\text{not-}A$, one forswears. For those who think that warranted assertion requires less, the account offered on the right hand side of *Relative* will presumably be relaxed *in tandem*. But the crucial point is that whatever the epistemic standard required by warranted assertion, there will be a correlative epistemic modal standing to it as epistemic possibility, as we have so far been understanding it, stands to knowledge. And it would hardly be plausible that assessment-relativism be appropriate for the intuitive notion of epistemic possibility, whatever that is, but not for this modal.

Very well. The second assumption we need springs from the reflection above that some instances of

$EP[Q] \ \& \ EP[X \text{ knows that not-}Q]$

are acceptable and harmless. We just saw an example: from my present state of information, it is epistemically possible that that $10^{27} + 1$ is a prime but also epistemically possible you, the reader, know that $10^{27} + 1$ is not a prime. Now for a particular Q and choice of method, it may be that one who verifies Q , or $\text{not-}Q$, by that method can normally know that they know. Plausibly, simple arithmetical propositions and arithmetical computation provide an example. So in such a case, it seems that if the relevant instance of the above schema is acceptable and harmless, so is this (our second) assumption:

(2): Some instances of
 $EP[Q] \ \& \ EP[X \text{ knows that } X \text{ knows that not-}Q]$
 are acceptable and harmless.

But now, since someone who knows that [he] knows that not- Q knows that Q is not epistemically possible, it seems to follow that the following will hold in such an acceptable and harmless case:

$$EP[Q] \ \& \ EP[X \text{ knows that not } EP[Q]]$$

and hence that

(*Rogue*) $EP[Q] \ \& \ EP[\text{not } EP[Q]]$

should also be acceptable and harmless (by factivity of “knows” and closure of EP). But (*Rogue*) is of the proscribed form.

There is an obvious solution, no doubt. The objection, however, is that the supporter of *Relative*—or of any similar though perhaps more complex form of assessment-relativism for epistemic possibility claims—cannot avail himself of it; and that it is not clear that he has any other solution. The obvious solution is that (*Rogue*), validly inferred from acceptable premises as above, must be read as having *hidden constituents*. It is to be read, very crudely, as something of the form:

$$EP_x[Q] \ \& \ EP_x[\text{not-}EP_y[Q]],$$

where the varying suffixes mark variables for states of information that can of course be bound or variously instantiated. For me, it is epistemically possible both that $10^{27} + 1$ is a prime and that for you, the reader, it is not epistemically possible that $10^{27} + 1$ is a prime. But to express this harmless case, I have to be able to instantiate the variable ‘ y ’ differently from the variable ‘ x ’, and the variables—naturally—have to be there in the logical form in the first place. So construed,—surely as demanded,—(*Rogue*) isn’t really of the proscribed form. The problem for assessment-relativism, however, is that it has no option of such a construal. There is, for assessment-relativism, no place in the logical form of an epistemic possibility claim for a variable that ranges over states of information, and that may take instances other than the state of information of an assessor. It is no part of such claims, construed as by the relativist, to *talk about* states of information or knowledge and what is compatible with them. The state of information parameter belongs to the context of assessment, not the content of the claim assessed. This is of the absolute essence of the view. The distinction is parallel, roughly, to that between an assessment-relativist construal of ascriptions of knowledge, as MacFarlane has also advocated,²⁴ and the kind of

²⁴ MacFarlane (2005a)

subject-sensitive or *interest-relative* invariantist account offered by Stanley and Hawthorne.²⁵ On the former kind of view, the truth-value of an utterance of ‘X knows that P’ may vary with standards determined by the context of an assessor. But there is nothing in the semantics of the utterance as such— the proposition it expresses—to determine what those standards may be; it does not speak of an assessment parameter that needs to be settled before it can take a truth-value. For a view of the Stanley-Hawthorne kind, however, the opposite is true: the proposition expressed does speak of the subject, X, of the knowledge ascription and—according to the view—it will be determined by X’s interests at the time of ascription (so there is a modest element of contextuality of truth-conditions) what the appropriate standards are to determine whether X’s evidence suffices, for its part, for knowledge that P. In any case, the proposition concerned takes its truth-value absolutely. Whatever the respective merits of this kind of view and assessment-relativism in the case of knowledge ascriptions, it seems to me that no account of epistemic modals is going to succeed unless it makes provision for embedded occurrences of an operator of epistemic possibility to involve reference to information-states of a subject distinct from that of an assessor of the embedding context. Since—in contrast to the case of knowledge ascriptions—no such reference is generally explicit in the overt grammar of the sentence, a developed, subject-sensitive account of epistemic modals, analogous to the Stanley-Hawthorne view about knowledge, will have to traffic in special hypotheses about covert logical form, or even in ‘unarticulated’ constituents. Fare that approach as it may, it remains, to repeat, a cardinal feature of assessment-relativism about epistemic possibility that “EP[Q]” involves no such tacit reference—that it expresses the *same proposition* in all occurrences—and that all that is permitted to vary is the context of assessment in which an embedding statement is considered. So shackled, the relativist has no way of making out that (*Rogue*) is not of the proscribed form.

IV Summary of conclusions

NewAge relativist treatments have been proposed for a variety of reasons in different regions of discourse. In a wide range of cases these have been metaphysical. What is particularly interesting about the case of the epistemic modalities is that the proposal is offered as assisting the provision of a systematic *semantic* theory in the light of certain allegedly otherwise recalcitrant aspects of the linguistic practices concerned — specifically, data of retrospective self-correction, and ‘correction by eavesdropper’.

²⁵ Hawthorne (2004), Stanley (2005)

Our review of the issues, though unavoidably incomplete, suggests pessimism whether assessment-relativistic semantics is likely to make best sense of these data. In many cases, it is a competitive thought that what is corrected is not the epistemic possibility claim itself but the embedded proposition, understood as having been tentatively endorsed or entered into the reckoning for some practical purpose by the making of the original (apparently) epistemic-modal claim. In any case, both relevant kinds of corrective pattern are partial—there is a very significant range of cases in which they are not upheld, and in general there seem to be no fewer counterexamples to *Relative*—the simplest natural way of assigning relativistic truth-conditions to epistemic possibility claims—than to its non-relativistic competitors. Additional difficulties for the assessment-relativist direction include providing the resources to handle certain kinds of embedded epistemic possibility clauses, and the fact that the retrospective correction data seem to be at odds with the admission, presumably integral to relativism, that the criticised claim may have been correct in its original assessment-context.

Perhaps most important, our discussion has indirectly raised doubts about whether, whatever one thinks about epistemic possibility in particular, there is at present any extant clear model of the patterns that linguistic data in any region of discourse should *in principle* assume if they are to provide compelling grounds for preferring an assessment-relativist style of semantic theory. While that lack remains, we should regard the jury as out on whether the New Age ‘linguistic-turn’ to relativism—as opposed to the more traditional metaphysical lines of entry—can in principle be made cogent at all.²⁶

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²⁶ Thanks for valuable critical comments and suggestions to colleagues in the *Arché* Contextualism and Relativism seminar over the last two sessions, to participants in my NYU seminar on Relativism in Fall 2005 and at the workshop on Epistemic Modality and Relativism organised by Philipp Keller in Geneva in April 2006, and to Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen for informal discussion of the issues.

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