RELATIVISM AND THE NORMS OF ASSERTION

According to a very influential philosophical tradition, the notion of objective truth is an essential resource for an account of the norms that rule some related notions, such as belief and assertion. More specifically, the normativity of truth involves that acts of belief and assertion are such that they should be revised, and perhaps withdrawn, once that the object of belief or assertion turns out as not true (see *e.g.* DUMMETT (1959) and, for a survey, LYNCH (2004)).

Relativism, i.e. the thesis that truth is not objective because it depends on some parameter (perhaps supplied by an assignment of truth values to propositions, an individual taken as a judge, a suitably selected context), has become quite popular during recent years, *e.g.* in the works of Kölbel (2002, 2003), Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2005, 2007). These authors try to argue that the intuition that truth is relative can make sense because we can restrict it to some specific domains of discourse (such as matters of taste, ethics, questions as to whether a belief is justified *etc.*). Moreover, some relativists try to defend their view also by arguing that it is compatible with the intuition that truth has a normative role. According to the relativists' suggestions, persons are committed to judge or assert only those propositions that are relatively true (with respect to a suitable parameter); and if the proposition at issue turns out as relatively not true (with respect to the same parameter), then the act of belief or assertion must be revised. That is enough, according to relativists, in order to grant that even relative truth can have a substantial role as a theoretical resource for an account of belief and assertion.

The purpose of my work is to provide some reasons for rejecting the claim that relative truth can have a normative role. By concentrating my attention on some specific versions of the relativist insight, I will argue that the normative role of truth becomes quite poor within a relativist framework, because it seems to provide only some very weak constraints for assertion; moreover, I will argue that the very concept of relative truth is far from being clarified, because the relation between a proposition and the parameters that make it true has no clear nature.

My starting point is an analysis of John MacFarlane's (2005) account of assertions in terms of relative truth. MacFarlane considers sentences as «true at context of use C_U and context of assessment C_A», in that he takes the propositions they express at C_U as «true in the world of C_U and the aesthetic standards of the assessor at C_A». Then he states Relativism about truth as «the view hat there is at least one assessment-sensitive sentence», i.e. a sentence that in a given context of use expresses a proposition whose «truth value varies with the context of assessment (keeping the context of use fixed)». However, in the author's view, assessment-sensitivity does not rule out that relative truth be normative, because it can be employed in such obligations as

the following: « (W*) In asserting that p at C_1, one commits oneself to withdrawing the assertion (in any future context C_2) if p is shown to be untrue relative to context of use C_1 and context of assessment C_2».

A basic problem for MacFarlane's account is a risk of circularity. On the one hand, since the doubly contextual truth predicate can figure within clauses of obligation for assertions, MacFarlane concludes that even relative truth can play a normative role. On the other hand, in order to grant that relative truth is genuinely normative, we must ask what it means for a proposition to be true at the world of C_U and the aesthetic standards of the assessor at C_A; but then we cannot be satisfied with the answer that the doubly contextual truth predicate makes sense just because it can be shown to figure within norms for assertion. In other words: provided that assessment-sensitivity makes sense, it can be the basis for a genuine normativity; but the mere fact that assessment-sensitivity is formally compatible with normative clauses does not prove that assessment-sensitivity makes sense.

A more complex problem arises if an understanding of what it means for a proposition to be true at a context of assessment C_A is taken to depend, as MacFarlane's formulation suggests, on a prior understanding of what it means for a proposition to be true at the aesthetic standards of a given assessor A. Perhaps we might conceive A's standards as a set of propositions, but what is the constituting property of such a set? We cannot answer that A's aesthetic standard at C_A is constituted by those propositions that A actually believes, because then assertion would be governed just by a mere obligation of sincerity; similarly, if A's standard is the set of the propositions that A is justified to believe or assert, the obligation is *prima facie* weaker than a norm of truth. We could neither take the constituting property of A's standard as a primitive notion, because this would mean assuming that relative truth is a legitimate notion - something still to be proved; and even if we try to characterise A's aesthetic standard as constituted by the propositions towards which A has some normative relation, some theoretical work must be done in order to prove that no circularity is at issue.

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