No deep disagreement for new relativists

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Abstract Recently a number of writers have argued that a new form of relativism involves a form of semantic context-dependence which helps it escape the perhaps most common objection to ordinary contextualism; that it cannot accommodate our intuitions about disagreement. I argue: (i) In order to evaluate this claim we have to pay closer attention to the nature of our intuitions about disagreement. (ii) We have different such intuitions concerning different questions: we have more stable disagreement intuitions about moral disputes than about, say, disputes about matters of taste. (iii) The new form of relativism does not vindicate the stable intuitions about disagreement. (iv) It does a better job explaining the unstable intuitions than contextualism. But, pace some relativists, it is not clear that assertion-truth rather than just proposition-truth has to be relativized to accomplish this.

Keywords Relativism · Contextualism · Disagreement · Moral relativism

Contextualism about some class of claims, such as claims about what is delicious, funny or morally wrong, is the view that the content and therefore truth of these claims depends on the context in which they are made. The idea is that expressions like ‘delicious’, ‘funny’ and ‘morally wrong’ behave much like indexicals. When I say “Jim Carrey is funny” or “lying is always morally wrong”, the contents and truth-values of my statements depend not only on the features of Jim Carrey and acts of lying, but also on my (and perhaps other persons’ such as my community’s or the audience’s) sense of humour and moral standards. Such views are often seen as suffering from a serious problem: they clash with our intuitions about disagreement. If you reply, “No, sometimes lying isn’t wrong”, we think of this as a disagreement about whether lying is always wrong. But according to contextualism, if our moral
standards differ so that I disapprove of lying but you don’t, then ‘morally wrong’ has different referents in our two utterances, and so there is no disagreement.

This has often been seen a reason to abandon contextualism for absolutism about the sort of claims in question. However, in recent years a number of writers have argued for a form of relativism according to which the truth-value of certain claims is context-dependent in a new way. On this view the truth-value varies, not because the claims express different propositions in different contexts, but because the propositions expressed have different truth-values relative to different contexts (Brogaard 2008; Egan et al. 2005; Kölbel 2002, 2003, 2004; Lasersohn 2005; MacFarlane 2003, 2005, 2007, Forthcoming). One of the main motivations for introducing this form of relativism has been the idea that it can account for our intuitions about disagreement (Brogaard 2008; Kölbel 2002, 2003; Lasersohn 2005; MacFarlane 2007).

The most developed defence of this idea is given by John MacFarlane in a recent article (2007) where he develops an argument to the effect that his version of this form of relativism can handle disagreement, while a similar form cannot. I will argue that MacFarlane is right in his objection to the other form of relativism, at least concerning intuitions about some disagreements, but that his own variant is afflicted by a similar problem in explaining intuitions about those disagreements.

When we pay closer attention to the intuitions that are to be explained, we can distinguish between two different kinds of discourses or claims that contextualism and now relativism has been argued to hold for: claims about which we have deep or stable intuitions about disagreement—such as moral claims—and those about which we have more unstable intuitions about disagreement—such as claims about deliciousness. I argue that no form of relativism can account for stable intuitions about disagreement. When it comes to the unstable intuitions, it seems that relativism is better equipped than contextualism in explaining them. Depending on how the intuitions are interpreted, however, it is not clear that MacFarlane’s variant of relativism can offer a better explanation than the variants he criticizes.¹

First things first, however:

1 Preliminaries: explaining intuitions about disagreement

1.1 What sort of explanation?

Let us first be clear on what it is relativists hold that their view can do and contextualism can’t. The objection against contextualism is that it clashes with our intuitions about disagreement. This means that it can be replied in two different ways. One kind of reply is to admit that the preferred contextualist theory clashes with our intuitions about disagreements, but that it is the intuitions that are flawed and that we can explain why we have them. That is, we can explain away the intuitions.

¹ Many of the conclusions in this paper are also presented in chapter 4 of my dissertation (2007).
Replies of the second kind deny that the preferred contextualist theory, when properly specified, clashes with our intuitions about disagreement. The theory implies that people do disagree in the way we intuitively think they do. If this is true, we can say that the theory in question confirms our intuitions about disagreement. This is the kind of reply relativists have argued that they can give while contextualists can’t.

1.2 What to explain?

Erica: This pie is delicious.
Jacob: You think? I think it tasted quite bad. At least it’s not delicious.

Intuitively, this little conversation is a disagreement about what is delicious. Erica and Jacob disagree about something—just like we can disagree about the cause of global warming or about whether or not Elvis Presley is dead, they disagree about the taste of the pie. I think, however, that our intuitions about disagreement are different in the case of taste than in these other cases: even though we sense disagreement here, on reflection we (or most of us at least) also think that it is not a disagreement over some fact about the pie. We think instead that what is displayed in conversations like this are differences in standards of taste. Erica likes the taste of the pie, Jacob doesn’t. We think that there is no difference over and above that: the conversations do not signal that Erica and Jacob disagree about whether the pie has some property independent of the relation it stands in to their standards of taste; neither does it signal that they disagree about the relation it stands in to their standards of taste respectively. So, we feel on reflection, there is nothing they really disagree about, in the sense of having conflicting beliefs about some matter of fact—they merely differ as to what pleases their palates. Suppose, for example, that the conversation continues as follows:

Erica: What? This is the best pie I have tasted ever, how can you say that it is not delicious?
Jacob: Well, I guess that we simply have different tastes.
Erica: You don’t see my point, do you? The pie is delicious and you obviously cannot see that.

I think that most of us find Erica’s insistence that the pie really is delicious (whether or not Jacob can appreciate this) quite silly. Jacob’s attitude, on the other hand, seems sensible. What they discovered was that they like different things in food. Once this is established there is not much more to be said about that; there is no fact about the pie they disagree about. I will say that, in this sense, our intuition that this is a disagreement is unstable. What at first might seem to be a disagreement about some fact (e.g. a fact about the pie), just like in the global warming and Elvis examples, on reflection is not that. (My example here is ‘delicious’, but I could just as well have chosen ‘funny’ or ‘beautiful’. It seems to me that we have unstable intuitions about disagreements involving these words as well.)

One thing should be noted: the fact that we have unstable intuitions concerning disagreements about deliciousness in this sense, does not remove the fact that we
clearly experience them as disagreements. Conversations like the one above are intuitively different from, say, a conversation where I say, “I am Ragnar” and you say, “I am not Ragnar”. Here we see no disagreement what so ever. This, obviously, is why there is a problem for contextualism about taste; if ‘delicious’ functions like ordinary indexicals we should not experience disagreement about the deliciousness of things any more than we experience this one as a disagreement about whether Ragnar is I or not (cf. Kölbel 2002, p. 40). I will return to the question of how to interpret the unstable intuitions about disagreement when I discuss the question of whether relativism can confirm them.

Contextualism has also been proposed for claims about which we have stable intuitions about disagreement. The expressions I have in mind are moral expressions like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. According to moral contextualism the truth-value of moral claims is relative to the speaker’s (or her culture’s) morality (Dreier 1990; Harman and Thomson 1996; Prinz 2007; Westermarck 1970; Wong 1984). (Such views are most often referred to as ‘appraiser relativism’, ‘speaker relativism’ or ‘indexical relativism’. For sake of clarity I will call it ‘moral contextualism’ here, reserving the epithet of relativism for the new forms of context-dependence.) Moral contextualism is often quickly dismissed as implausible due to its implications regarding moral disagreement (Brink 1989; Kölbel 2002; Moore 1912; Smith 1994; Streiffer 1999; Timmons 2003; Wright 2001). Consider the following moral dispute between a Kantian, we can call him Kant, and a utilitarian, Smart:

Kant: It is wrong to punish innocent Irwin.
Smart: No, it is not wrong to punish innocent Irwin.

If moral contextualism is true (or certain variants of it—similar examples can be construed for other variants), both Kant and Smart are correct in their assertions—so there is no disagreement. But we think of Kant and Smart’s dispute as a disagreement: they disagree about whether a certain action (or action type) is morally wrong. There is a difference, though, from the intuitions about disagreement we have about issues concerning deliciousness. Many of us, at least, are not ready to retract or modify our judgment that there is a disagreement about some property of the act in question, not even on reflection. We know that Kant and Smart have (accept) different moralities, and that the act in question stands in different relations to these moralities respectively. But we do not think that this is the only difference displayed by their conversation; they also disagree about the wrongness of the act. Many of us, then, have stable intuitions that moral disputes are disagreements about some matter of fact.

In this sense we experience moral disagreements like disagreements over “objective”, non-evaluative, facts. If I think that man has landed on the moon and you think man has not landed on the moon, then we think of us as disagreeing about some fact. We do not think on reflection that, when we have established that in my conception of the world man has landed on the moon while in your conception man has not been on the moon, there really is nothing more to quarrel about. The disagreement does not dissolve upon closer inspection. We still think that we disagree about some fact, and this is what we (or many of us) think about Smart and Kant as well.
The fact that we have different intuitions about disagreements within different discourses for which relativism has been suggested, means that we face two different questions. We should ask both weather relativism can confirm stable and unstable disagreement intuitions. First, however, let us get a clearer picture of the relativist idea.

2 Proposition relativism

Contextualism builds on the well-known phenomenon that certain expressions, such as sentences containing indexicals, have their contents and (therefore) truth-values determined partly by the context in which they are uttered or used. According to the new form of relativism, the truth-values of certain expressions are context-dependent not because they have different contents in different contexts of use, but because the truth-values of the propositions they express are relative to e.g. standards of taste or moral standards. In the case of ‘delicious’, the idea is that the sentence “blue-berry pie is delicious” expresses the same proposition no matter who utters it, but that this proposition might be true relative to your standard of taste but false relative to mine. Since this view relativizes proposition truth, let us call it proposition relativism.

As MacFarlane rightly emphasises, this idea actually keeps in line with standard Kaplan style semantics, which already contains the idea of relative propositions (2007, p. 21). On the Kaplanian view, sentences express propositions relative to contexts of use: sentences containing context-dependent expressions such as indexicals express different propositions relative different contexts of use, and sentences without such expressions express the same propositions relative to every context of use. In turn, the propositions expressed have their truth-values relative to different circumstances of evaluation. The circumstances of evaluation are usually thought to be possible worlds (but, as MacFarlane points to, there are ideas according to which other things, such as times, should be included here). Thus, every proposition which is not necessarily true or false (such as the proposition that there are cars in year 2008) is true relative to some possible worlds (such as our actual one) but not relative to others (worlds where there are no cars in 2008). So already here we have the notion of relative truth-values for propositions: before we can say whether a proposition is true or not, we have to know relative to which circumstance of evaluation, which possible world, we are to evaluate it.

The claim that proposition relativism holds for certain expressions is the claim that the relevant circumstances of evaluations for the propositions expressed by these expressions are not possible worlds but something more fine-grained (in the sense that they can differ within possible worlds), such as moral standards or standards of taste.  

2 There is still no terminological consensus in this area. In MacFarlane’s terminology the view just described does not yet count as relativism (but as “non-indexical contextualism”), since formally it doesn’t differ from the standard Kaplanian view—there are just new parameters in the circumstance of evaluation. Brogaard follows MacFarlane in this, calling her view both “non-indexical contextualism” and “perspectivalism”. We will see later how MacFarlane thinks this idea needs to be complemented to
Though proposition relativism involves the idea that what we say (the proposition we express) when we utter a proposition relative sentence is true relative to some circumstances of evaluation but false relative to others, it also involves a non-relative idea about what we should aim at when we utter such sentences. If I am a competent speaker, i.e. if I master the relativist expressions in question, and want to make a sincere assertion, then I will try to assert a proposition that is true relative to my own circumstance. We can call this the idea of use-centric assertion conditions. To exemplify: According to proposition relativism about ‘delicious’, if I don’t like the taste of liquorice then I should say “liquorice is not delicious”, but the right thing to say for someone who likes liquorice would be “liquorice is delicious”. In this regard this view in no different from contextualism about ‘delicious’. Given the way proposition relativism is analogous to the ordinary relativization of propositions to possible worlds, this idea about what we should assert is also what we could expect. You should assert that there are cars in 2008 only if there are cars in 2008 in the possible world where you make the utterance.

Now, let us turn to the question of how relativism can handle intuitions about disagreement.

3 Proposition relativism and stable disagreement intuitions

Let us first look at moral proposition relativism and how it handles our intuitions about moral disagreements, since these are what I have called stable intuitions. We will return to unstable intuitions later. According to moral proposition relativism moral sentences express propositions whose truth-values are relative to moral standards. This idea has been defended by Kölbé (2002, 2004, 2005), and more recently by Berit Brogaard (2008). Kölbé’s main argument is that this is the only theory that can account for the fact that moral disagreements are “faultless disagreements”: it is the case both (i) that the disputants are in a disagreement, and (ii) that neither of them has made a mistake. Other theories can’t account for this. On the one hand, moral realism implies that one of the disputants have made a mistake. On the other hand, expressivism and contextualism implies that there is no real disagreement. Also Brogaard lists the ability to account for the fact that moral disputes are faultless disagreements as an advantage of the view.

How is moral proposition relativism supposed to account for (i), that is, that moral disputes are disagreements? First, while contextualism implies that ‘wrong’ in our example above has different content when Kant and Smart uses it respectively,
if proposition relativism is true then ‘wrong’ has the same content and consequently it is the same proposition that is accepted and rejected by the two disputants respectively (e.g., Brogaard 2008, p. 403; Köbel 2003, p. 54). Second, the disputants disagree in the sense that they express (or accept) propositions that cannot be true relative to the same perspective (it cannot be true relative to one and the same moral perspective that punishing innocent Irwin is wrong and that it is not wrong) (Brogaard 2008, p. 403; Köbel forthcoming).

This is not sufficient to capture the sense in which we intuitively think that they disagree, however. Moral perspectives serve the same function in proposition relativism as possible worlds do in the traditional Kaplanian picture; they are circumstances of evaluation. Two persons who have different moralities thus make their moral assertions in different circumstances of evaluation, like we can imagine that ordinary (non-proposition relative) assertions can be made in different possible worlds. Here’s an example from MacFarlane:

Consider Jane (who inhabits this world, the actual world) and June, her counterpart in another possible world. Jane asserts that Mars has two moons, and June denies this very proposition. Do they disagree? Not in any real way. Jane’s assertion concerns our world, while June’s concerns hers. If June lives in a world where Mars has three moons, her denial may be just as correct as Jane’s assertion. (MacFarlane 2007, p. 23)

The propositions Jane and June express cannot be true relative to the same possible world. So if we just look at their assertions we might think that they disagree. But they have not in any way indicated that they have different views about whether Mars has two moons in any specific possible world. For all we know from their utterances, they may well agree that Mars has two moons in Jane’s possible world and that Mars does not have two moons in June’s possible world. To really disagree they would have to be in the same circumstance of evaluation, or at least intend their judgments to hold for the same circumstance of evaluation. In MacFarlane’s terms, the assertions would have to concern the same circumstance of evaluation. When we understand that their assertions concern different circumstances of evaluation the sense of disagreement dissolves.

According to proposition relativism, as I define it here, the new parameters that serve as circumstances of evaluation (like moral perspectives) have the same role as circumstances of evaluation have in this original Kaplanian semantic framework. That is, an assertion concerns the circumstance of evaluation of the context of use, viz, the circumstance of the speaker. Brogaard explicitly adopts this view when she describes her view as follows:

In accordance with standard semantics, the default circumstances of evaluation are fully determined by the context of use […], but the circumstances are non-standard: they are <world, time, judge> triples, where the default value of the judge parameter is the speaker. (Brogaard 2008, p. 400)

Köbel’s view on this matter is less clear and seems to have changed over time. In some papers (e.g. Köbel 2004) he introduces his relativist view through comparing it to the Kaplanian framework but without explicitly making the further claim that
the circumstance of evaluation has exactly the same role. At other places it seems that he wants to make this further claim:

[…] those who think that the truth-value of contents varies with possible worlds will say something along these lines: a belief with a content is correct only if that content is true in the possible world where the belief occurs. Or: an utterance of a (declarative) sentence is correct only if the proposition expressed by the sentence in the context of the utterance is true at the possible world determined by the context. Those who introduce additional relativizations of propositional truth will have to give analogous explanations of the normative role of truth. I gave a brief sketch of how this can be done by a genuine relativist: a belief with a content is correct only if that content is true at the possible world at which the belief occurs and in the perspective the believer has at the time at which she has the belief (where perspective possession is a theoretical relation that needs further spelling out). (Kölbel 2007, p. 284)

In his latest paper, however, his view seems to be that the speaker’s (or believer’s) circumstance of evaluation isn’t privileged when we determine the correctness of utterances of relativist sentences (Kölbel 2009, p. 387). However, let us stick to proposition relativism for the moment.

It is true that on moral proposition relativism, when Kant says that punishing innocent Irwin is wrong and Smart says that this is not so, the propositions they assert cannot both be true at any one circumstance of evaluation (moral perspective). But this does not mean that they disagree. In analogy with Jane’s and June’s assertions, Smart’s and Kant’s assertions concern different circumstances of evaluation, different moral perspectives. It might very well be that they agree that punishing innocent Irwin is wrong at Kant’s moral perspective and that punishing innocent Irwin is not wrong at Smart’s moral perspective.

This means that proposition relativism cannot confirm the stable intuitions about disagreement we (or many of us) have about moral disputes. Proposition relativism predicts that our sense of disagreement dissolves when we realise that the assertions of disputing parties such as Kant and Smart concern different circumstances of evaluation; we should understand that the assertions do not indicate that there is a circumstance of evaluation relative to which the parties disagree about the truth of the proposition in question. And since propositions have truth-values only relative to circumstances of evaluation (in the Kaplanian semantic framework we are working within) this means that they do not disagree about the truth-value of a proposition at all.4

This is very similar to the problem contextualism has with disagreements. The problem for moral contextualism is that it makes moral assertions made by speakers with different moralities be about different things (express different propositions),

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4 Similar objections against Brogaard’s view has been given by Lars Binderup (2008). He focuses on the fact that if proposition relativism were true, then for “semantically clearheaded users of moral language”, “all rational incentive to engage in further debate would evaporate, leaving a general tolerance of moral disagreement” (p. 412), since each party would understand that the proposition the other party accepts might be true in that party’s perspective, even if it is false in her own perspective.
and that they therefore do not disagree in the intuitive sense when they are involved in moral disputes. Proposition relativism makes moral assertions made by speakers with different moralities concern different moralities.

MacFarlane criticizes proposition relativism on what I take to be the same grounds as I have. I quoted MacFarlane saying that in a situation where the same proposition is asserted by one speaker and rejected by another, the two do not disagree if their assertions concern different circumstances of evaluation. MacFarlane connects this idea of which world an assertion concerns to an idea of when assertions are accurate. (MacFarlane speaks of accurate and inaccurate assertions and utterances instead of true and false ones, since he thinks that assertions and utterances are not the kind of things that can be true. I will follow him in this, without taking a stand on whether assertions or utterances can be true.) Ordinary propositions are governed by what MacFarlane calls use-centric accuracy: an assertion of a proposition is accurate if the proposition is true at the possible world where the assertion is made. Though Jude rejects the proposition Jane asserts, both the rejection and the assertion are accurate if they are made in possible worlds where the propositions they express are true. The idea seems to be (though MacFarlane does not explicitly say so) that it is the truth-value of the proposition expressed by an assertion at the possible world of the assertion that determines the accuracy of the assertion, since it is this possible world that the assertion concerns.

Proposition relativism imports this kind of use-centric accuracy though it changes the picture of what are the relevant circumstances of evaluation for the kinds of expressions in question. Thus, though Smart asserts a proposition Kant rejects, both the rejection and the assertion can be accurate, since they are made in circumstances of evaluations (moral frameworks) in which the propositions they express are true respectively.

This serves as the basis for MacFarlane’s objection. A necessary condition for two assertions (such as an assertion and a rejection of the same proposition) to constitute a disagreement, MacFarlane holds, is that both cannot be accurate at the same time. So, since Smart’s and Kant’s assertions can be accurate at the same time, they do not constitute a disagreement. Thus, this form of proposition relativism does not account for our intuitions about moral disagreements.

4 Assertion relativism and stable disagreement intuitions

MacFarlane argues that proposition relativism can be complemented to handle this problem. Proposition relativism is a view about the truth of propositions; the truth of certain propositions is relative to something more fine-grained than possible worlds (such as moral perspectives). What relativists need in order to account for disagreement, MacFarlane argues, is to also relativize the accuracy of assertions to contexts of assessment, and not to contexts of use as on the traditional, use-centric, picture. MacFarlane calls the new idea perspectival accuracy. On this idea an assertion is accurate as assessed from a context of assessment if, and only if, the proposition expressed by the assertion is true at the circumstance of evaluation of
the assessment. We can call this revised form of proposition relativism ‘assertion relativism’.5

Let us apply the idea to moral relativism. As assessed by (or relative to) Smart, Smart’s own assertion that it is not wrong to punish innocent Irwin is accurate while Kant’s rejection of that proposition is inaccurate. This is so since the proposition in question is true at the moral perspective of Smart, which is the circumstance of evaluation of the assessment. As assessed by Kant, on the other hand, Smart’s assertion is inaccurate and Kant’s rejection is accurate. On this view, then, we can legitimately evaluate other persons’ moral assertions as accurate or not accurate on basis of our own moral perspective, and not, as on Kölbl’s view, on basis of the speaker’s perspective.

Another way to put this view, though MacFarlane does not spell this out, is that it tells us that which moral perspective moral assertions concern is relative to a context of assessment. When Smart assesses Kant’s assertion as inaccurate, this is correct since relative to Smart’s context of assessment, Kant’s assertion concerns Smart’s moral perspective.

How is this supposed to save disagreement? The idea is that as assessed from any context of assessment, it will hold that Smart’s and Kant’s assertions cannot be accurate at once. Thus, relative to every perspective, we have a disagreement in this sense. For any person who considers their assertions it will be correct for her to see it as a disagreement, it seems, since relative to her context of assessment their assertions actually concern her moral perspective and at any moral perspective at most one of the propositions expressed by the two assertions can be true.

4.1 Contradictory assertions and beliefs—but not disagreeing persons

I think this view nonetheless fails to account for our intuitions about moral disagreements. It is true that on assertion relativism it is correct for any assessor to see the assertions made by Smart and Kant as conflicting or contradictory. The view thus accounts for our intuitions that the assertions contradict one another. But we do not merely think of the assertions as conflicting, we also intuitively think that Smart’s and Kant’s assertions show that they, Smart and Kant, disagree about whether it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin. Assertion relativism cannot account for this. Shortly put, the problem is that on this view, Smart’s and Kant’s assertions do not indicate that there is a circumstance of evaluation for which they disagree about whether the proposition that it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin is true at that circumstance. They may indeed agree about the truth-value of that proposition at every circumstance of evaluation. This is not how we experience moral disputes.

5 Lasersohn (2005, 2005) also defends a form of assertion relativism about predicates of taste. On his view, the judge-parameter to which the truth of an assertion about taste is relative, is not determined by the situation in which the sentence is uttered (so that the judge is the speaker), since that would make the assertion objectively true. Instead, the judge is the one who assesses the assertion, so that the same assertion can have different truth-values relative to different assessors. In contrast to MacFarlane, however, it seems that Lasersohn only uses the claim that the truth of propositions is relative (and not the claim that the truth of assertions is relative) to explain disagreement.
Let me explain a bit further. Two assertions are contradictory only if the following condition holds:

*(Contradictory assertions)* there is a circumstance of evaluation, C1, such that both assertions concern C1, and the two propositions asserted cannot both be true at the same circumstance of evaluation.

This seems to be an intuitively plausible condition of when two assertions contradict each other given the Kaplanian semantic framework. It is not enough that the assertions cannot both be true at the same circumstance: they also have to concern the same circumstance (remember the case of Jane and June). Furthermore, this is the form of contradiction between assertions we are licensed to experience if assertion relativism is true (when assessed by P, both P’s and Q’s assertions concern the same framework, namely P’s.). On the other hand, two people disagree only if:

*(Disagreeing persons)* there is a circumstance of evaluation, C1, such that each person holds some proposition to be true at C1, and the two propositions cannot both be true at the same circumstance of evaluation.

This seems to be an intuitively plausible condition on when two people disagree about some matter of fact or about the truth of some proposition within a Kaplanian semantic framework. If they do not disagree over the truth-value of the proposition in question *at a given circumstance of evaluation* then there is no truth-value they disagree about at all. For (in this semantic framework) propositions have no truth-values independently of circumstances.

For ordinary (non-relative) assertions, both *use-centric accuracy* (or concern) and *use-centric assertion conditions* hold. So the assertions concern the circumstance of evaluation of the context of use; and competent speakers, when they are making sincere assertions, also aim at asserting propositions that are true at that circumstance of evaluation. Consequently, if two assertions concern the same circumstance of evaluation, it is also true that if the speakers are competent and sincere they think that the propositions asserted respectively are true at that circumstance of evaluation. So if we have *contradictory assertions*, then we also have *disagreeing persons*.

Put in a slightly different way: For ordinary use-centric assertions, the possible worlds that our assertions concern are the possible worlds (circumstances of evaluations) we intend our assertions to hold for and think that the propositions they express are true at. When someone sincerely says, “Mars has two moons” she does so because she thinks Mars has two moons in the possible world where she is. This is why there is a disagreement between one person who rejects and another who accepts the same proposition, where the acceptance and rejection concern the same possible world (that is, two persons whose assertions cannot both be accurate at the same time): that they do so shows that there is one possible world relative to which one of them thinks, and the other thinks not, that the proposition is true.

Assertion relativism, on the other hand, gives us *contradictory assertions* but not *disagreeing persons*. The reason is that it involves the combination of *use-centric assertion conditions* and *perspectival concern* (and accuracy). That is, even though a competent (and sincere) speaker makes an assertion if and only if (she thinks) the
propositions asserted is true in the circumstance of evaluation of the context of use, the assertion concerns other circumstances of evaluations relative to other contexts of assessment. As a consequence of this combination, the fact that an assertion of a proposition, p, concerns circumstance C2 relative to some context of assessment, does not mean that the speaker thinks that p is true relative to C2. So even though the theory does license us to see any two moral assertions as concerning the same circumstance of evaluation, and thus licenses us to see the assertions as conflicting if the propositions they express cannot be true relative to the same circumstance, it does not license our intuition that the two speakers disagree. They may well agree about the truth of the propositions relative to every specific circumstance of evaluation.

Admittedly, it is intuitively odd that two people can sincerely make mutually contradictory assertions without disagreeing with each other. But this is nonetheless a consequence of assertion relativism. It is a consequence, as I have said, because the combination of perspectival concern and use-centric assertion conditions makes someone, Q, licensed to see another person’s assertion of p as concerning his own (Q’s) moral perspective, but not licensed to think that the other person think that p is true relative to Q’s moral perspective.

If we return to our example with Smart and Kant, the result of assertion relativism is that relative to Smart’s moral perspective, Kant’s assertion that punishing innocent Irwin is wrong concerns Smart’s moral perspective (and is accurate if it is wrong to punish Irwin at Smart’s moral perspective). So this view licenses Smart to think that at most one of his and Kant’s assertions can be accurate (since it licenses him to think that they concern the same (his own) moral perspective). But it does not license Smart to think that there is any real disagreement between him and Kant: for all we know (and for all Smart knows), Kant might very well believe (and know) that Smart’s moral perspective is not such that punishing Irwin is wrong at it. So, as far as Smart knows from Kant’s assertion, Kant and himself may well agree for every circumstance of evaluation (every moral perspective) about the truth-value of the proposition that it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin at that circumstance.

We should remember that circumstances of evaluations are the “things” at which propositions are true: if for every such thing we agree about the truth of some proposition, such as the proposition that it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin, then there is no room for us to disagree about the truth of that proposition. Thus, if we knew that moral assertion relativism was true, then we would not see Smart’s and Kant’s assertions as evidence of a real disagreement between Kant and Smart: we would know that their assertions are fully compatible with that they agree about the truth-value of the debated proposition at any moral framework, that is, at any circumstance at which it can be evaluated.

It doesn’t help to change the perspective from assertions to beliefs. MacFarlane’s relativism could be construed as a claim about the accuracy of beliefs as well as assertions. Relative to Smart, Kant’s belief that it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin concerns Smart’s moral perspective. So Smart is licensed to think that Kant and himself have conflicting beliefs concerning the same circumstance of evaluation. But given the perspectival view on accuracy and concern, this does not imply that he
is licensed to think that he himself and Kant disagree. Though Smart is licensed to think of Kant’s belief as concerning his own moral perspective (and as accurate if it is true at that), he cannot draw the conclusion that Kant believes that the proposition expressed is true at Smart’ moral perspective. Kant might very well say, “In Smart’s moral perspective it is not wrong to punish Irwin” and have the corresponding belief. And Smart might very well know this. Indeed, the fact that Smart and Kant have their beliefs about the wrongness of punishing Irwin is consistent with that they agree about the truth of the propositions they express at every circumstance of evaluation. And, again, since circumstances of evaluations are the “things” at which propositions are true, nothing remains for them to disagree about.

The conclusion is that neither proposition relativism nor assertion relativism can confirm the stable intuitions we (or at least many of us) have about moral disagreement. Only absolutism can do that, it seems. This does not rule out any of the two forms of relativism, of course, since it might still be possibly for relativists to explain away our intuitions. But it means that relativism does not necessarily have an advantage over contextualism when it comes to explaining intuitions about disagreements in areas where we have strong such intuitions. For contextualists might also be able to explain away these intuitions about disagreement, perhaps in the same or similar ways as relativists can.

5 Accounting for unstable disagreement intuitions

So far we have been concerned with moral disagreements. As I have said, I think there is a difference in how well proposition relativism and assertion relativism accounts for our intuitions about moral disagreement on the one hand and our intuitions about disagreement concerning taste on the other hand. For the latter intuitions are less stable than the former. Actually, at first sight, it might seem like assertion relativism fits perfectly with these unstable intuitions.

Recall Erica and Jacob’s dispute about the taste of a pie. Even though we don’t hesitate to describe this as a disagreement about what is delicious, on reflection we also have the sense that there is no real disagreement about any matter of fact involved in cases like this. In contrast to disagreements over factual matters, on reflection it seems that once we have established that Erica and Jacob have different standards of taste, so that one of them likes the pie and the other doesn’t, nothing more remains of the dispute. It doesn’t make sense for one of the parties to insist that the other party has not understood that the pie really is/isn’t delicious, since there is no fact about the pie they have conflicting beliefs about. If my arguments in the previous sections are correct, it seems that relativism (both assertion and proposition variants) can confirm this unstableness of our sense of disagreement. For it could be seen as an effect of that Erica and Jacob do not disagree about the truth of a proposition at a certain circumstance of evaluation, just like relativism implies.

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6 At least if it is not reasonable that the other party would enjoy the pie under normal circumstances, i.e. if she hadn’t just brushed her teeth.
But there is also another part to the unstable intuitions. Even though the idea of Erica and Jacob’s dispute as a disagreement over some fact about the pie dissolves on reflection, we still have a remaining sense of disagreement. No doubt their dispute can still intuitively be described as a disagreement about whether the pie is delicious. As noticed earlier, this is a difference from the intuitions we have about similar conversations involving ordinary indexicals. If I say, “My name is Ragnar” and you say, “My name is not Ragnar” we do not experience or describe this as a disagreement about anything at all.

So the question is whether any of the forms of relativism can confirm also the remaining sense of disagreement. I think that the answer to this question depends on how this sense is interpreted. How should we understand the difference we intuitively see between disputes about deliciousness and similar conversations involving ordinary indexical terms?

Interpretation 1 We could interpret the remaining sense of disagreement as not really being an intuition to the effect that the parties disagree about something, but that their assertions and beliefs contradict each other. On this interpretation the intuition can be confirmed by assertion relativism but not by proposition relativism, since only the former implies that the assertions and beliefs in question concern the same circumstance of evaluation.

Interpretation 2 On this understanding of the remaining sense of disagreement it can be confirmed by proposition relativism. Proposition relativism implies that the two disputants accept propositions that cannot be true at the same circumstance of evaluation. By itself, however, this does not seem to be sufficient to licence any sense of disagreement at all, as we have seen. In this respect, Erica and Jacob’s situation is analogous to the case where Jane and June, being in different possible worlds, assert and reject the propositions that Mars has two moons respectively. Here we sense no disagreement about the number of moons around Mars at all, as long as we keep in mind that they inhabit different possible worlds. But there is one difference between these two cases: in the case with matters of taste, different propositions are acceptable to different persons because they have different attitudes towards the object in question. So the sense in which we intuitively sense a disagreement between Erica and Jacob could be that they not only express propositions that cannot be true relative to one and the same circumstance of evaluation, but they do that because their different circumstances of evaluation consist in different attitudes towards the pie—one of them likes it and the other doesn’t. So in this case, in contrast to the case with Jane and June, there is a clear difference in how the parties psychologically relate to the object in question. This actually connects to one sense in which Kölbel says that his relativism implies disagreement. One disputant, say, Erica, cannot come to accept what the other, Jacob, says—i.e. the proposition Jacob expresses—without changing her mind. For whether or not she can accept what Jacob says depends on her own standard of taste, that is, a part of her mind. (Cf. Kölbel 2004, p. 307.) If this is the correct interpretation of the remaining sense of disagreement, then proposition relativism (as well as assertion relativism) can confirm it. There is yet another interpretation however:
Interpretation 3  The intuitive difference between Erica and Jacob’s dispute and similar conversations with ordinary indexicals (like “My name is Ragnar”/“My name is not Ragnar”), might simply be that in the former case the assertions indicate the form of difference in attitudes towards the object in question just discussed. On this interpretation, the sense of disagreement underlying our talk about Jacob and Erica disagreeing about whether the pie is delicious, is simply the same kind of disagreement we would have sensed if they had said, “I really like this pie!” and “What, I really don’t!” respectively. If this is the case, then contextualism can confirm this intuition just as well as the two forms of relativism. We should not be too quick to dismiss this option. Also a dispute of the latter kind could plausibly be described as a disagreement about the tastiness of the pie.

The question, then, is: In what sense do we on reflection think that disputes such as that between Erica and Jacob are disagreements? It seems to me that interpretation 3 does not capture everything there is to the remaining sense of disagreement. We do think that for Jacob to accept what Erica says, he would have to change his mind. In a situation where Erica says, “I really like this pie”, and Jacob sincerely says, “I really don’t”, we might think that Jacob would have to change his mind to (in some sense) agree with Erica about the taste of the pie—but not in order for him to agree with what she has said (that she likes the pie). Thus contextualism seems unable to confirm our intuitions about disagreement over matters of taste.

How about the choice between interpretation 1 and 2? The choice depends on whether, on reflection, we just give up the idea that Erica and Jacob disagree about some fact, or if we also give up the idea that their assertions really do contradict each other, in a sense implying that at most one of them can be true or accurate. If we tend to give up also the latter intuition, then proposition relativism accounts for the data as well as assertion relativism. This would mean that that there is no special niche for assertion relativism: it can’t confirm stable intuitions about disagreement, and unstable intuitions can be handled equally well without giving up use-centric accuracy.

To me, it is not clear which of these interpretations is correct. Admittedly, the descriptions of the alternatives are quite sketchy, and more has to be said about them. But they suffice to make the point that, before we have settled for one of the interpretations, it remains unclear whether assertion relativism has any advantage over proposition relativism when it comes to explaining our intuitions concerning disagreements about deliciousness. So we have to pay more attention to giving nuanced descriptions of the intuitions that constitute the data. I will have to leave this task to further research, however (I’ll say something about the methodological challenges of this task in next section, however.).

In MacFarlane’s article on relativism and disagreement, all the examples of expressions he suggests that relativism might hold for are of the sort I think we have unstable disagreement intuitions about (MacFarlane 2007). So given what I have said in the present section, he might be correct that his form of relativism can explain the intuitions we have about disagreements involving these expressions. My main point has been more general than this, however. First, MacFarlane does not
identify the reason why his relativism accounts for these examples. It is not because relativism can account for disagreements in a straightforward way, but because we do not have stable and unambiguous disagreement intuitions for these discourses. This means that the relativist explanation of disagreement intuitions cannot simply be transferred to any discourse. More specifically, it can’t be applied to discourses regarding which we have stable intuitions about disagreement. This is especially interesting since other writers, such as Kölbl and Brogaard, have suggested that some form of relativism is correct about one discourse of that kind, namely the moral discourse.\footnote{It should be noticed that some relativists (e.g. Lasersohn 2005) are quite explicit that the point of relativism is to account for disagreements that are not (in my vocabulary) stable. Lasersohn concludes that his relativism about matters of taste implies that disagreements in that discourse are “substanceless” (p. 684), which seems to amount to the claim that there is nothing (no fact) that the disputants disagree about.}

Second, as just noted, it is not clear that the ability to explain the unstable intuitions about disagreement gives any dialectical advantage over proposition relativism, even for discourses where we have such intuitions. For it is not clear that our unstable intuitions about disagreement are not best interpreted in a way such that proposition relativism can give confirming explanations of them. If they are, then MacFarlane’s arguments that his assertion relativism explains intuitions about disagreement in a way that proposition relativism cannot fails, both if we look at stable and unstable intuitions.

6 Concluding remarks

Before closing this article, let me make two methodological remarks concerning the discussion in the previous sections. The first concerns the data in the discussion above—our intuitions about disagreement. As philosophers often do, I have to a large extent relied on my own intuitions. Given that the relevant data is not only my intuitions but the intuitions of people in general, this is a sound methodology only under the assumption that other people share my intuitions on these matters. But it seems that this is something that should be investigated rather than just assumed. We should keep open the possibility that our own intuitions are not shared by everyone or not even by most people, and that this could be revealed by empirical studies. Even though I feel quite confident that most people have stable intuitions about disagreements when it comes to moral matters but not when it comes to matters of taste, it could turn out that I’m wrong about this. It could also turn out that the stability of the intuitions about disagreements in a certain area, as well as the exact nature of the intuitions, varies to a large extent between different people. If this is the case—and I find this quite likely—what I have argued above is that: to the extent that people have stable intuitions about disagreements in a certain area, relativism cannot confirm these intuitions; and to the extent that people have unstable intuitions about disagreements in some area, it might be that both forms of relativism can confirm these intuitions. It might also be the case that the different interpretations of the remaining sense of disagreement are correct for different
peoples intuitions, in which case both proposition relativism and assertion relativism
(and perhaps even contextualism) might confirm some people’s intuitions respectively.8

The second remark I want to make is that, even if we were confident that people’s
intuitions in general are in line with what I have assumed in my argumentation, we
should be careful when we draw further conclusions concerning the plausibility of
theories from the result that some theories can, and others cannot, confirm these
intuitions. It is not obvious that a confirming explanation is always better than an
explaining away. As a matter of fact, it has recently been argued that even if we
assume that moral absolutism can confirm our intuitions about moral disagreement,
this is not necessarily an advantage of this view at all (Björnsson, unpublished
manuscript 2008-05-20). Even if it is a fact that we all talk about the same thing
(and relative to the same circumstance of evaluation) when we use moral terms, this
fact cannot in a straightforward way explain that we intuitively think that we are
talking about the same thing (relative to the same circumstance) and thus that we
intuitively think of our (and others’) moral disputes as disagreements. The fact that
(if it is a fact) that we all speak about the same thing when we make moral
judgments can explain that I intuitively think that this is so only if this fact somehow
reveals itself to me, giving me a reason to believe that it is indeed a fact. But given
the vast amount of seemingly intractable diversity of opinions concerning moral
questions—i.e. the large diversity in the way we apply moral terms—is seems that I
(and others) have no straightforward such reason; rather, we have reason to think
that people do not speak about the same thing. So unless we can think of some other
way in which the fact that people speak about the same thing explains our intuition
that they do so, it seems that even if this is indeed a fact there is no reason to
think that this is what explains our intuition. Thus, according to this line of thought,
it need not be an advantage of absolutism that it can confirm our intuitions about
moral disagreements, since it is not obvious that there is a good confirming
explanation. I am not suggesting here that this is the correct view about the moral
absolutist explanations of moral disagreement. The point is just that we have to
consider matters like this before drawing further conclusions from the result that
contextualism and relativism can’t confirm our intuitions about disagreement.

As I have said, these are reasons to pause before drawing further conclusions
from the results I have reached. But the results are interesting nonetheless. When we
attend to the nature of our intuitions about disagreements concerning different sorts
of questions, we see that the new forms of relativism cannot confirm the stable
intuitions any more than ordinary contextualism. And we see that assertion
relativists are not obviously better equipped than proposition relativism when it
comes to confirming the unstable intuitions.

8 There is a further discussion concerning the role of intuitions in metaethical debate and what
conclusions to draw if people have very different such intuitions. Some writers have argued that given
that we are after analyses of moral concepts that capture peoples intuitions (which seems to be what large
parts of the meteathical literature are indeed after), it should make us question what might be called “the
single analysis assumption”—the idea that one single coherent analysis fit for moral expressions as
everyone uses them. Or, alternatively, we should change the goals of metaethical analyses. (Francén
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