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HOW TO DISPEL THE ASYMMETRY CONCERNING RETRACTION¹

abstract

MacFarlane (2014) advocates a radical form of semantic relativism. He argues that his proposal complies with the norms governing our assertion practices in various areas of discourse. These practices also include norms regarding the conditions in which it is inappropriate not to retract an assertion. Ferrari & Zeman (2014) identify an asymmetry concerning retractions in two relevant areas of discourse and argue that assessment-sensitivity needs to be supplemented with further theoretical tools to explain it. I dispel the asymmetry and conclude that assessment-sensitivity needs no supplementation to account for it.

keywords

retraction, assessment-sensitivity, asymmetry concerning retraction

- 1. Introduction** In his book *Assessment Sensitivity* (2014), John MacFarlane advocates a radical form of semantic relativism. In defence of his proposal, he argues that assessment-sensitivity (henceforth AS) complies with the norms governing our assertion practices in various areas of discourse, such as taste, morality, epistemic modality or deontic discourse. These practices include norms regarding the conditions in which it is appropriate to make an assertion, but also regarding the conditions in which it is appropriate to *retract*, or take back, an assertion. Ferrari & Zeman (2014) identify an asymmetry concerning moral and personal taste retractions. They argue that there are data supporting the existence of the asymmetry, and that AS needs to be supplemented with further theoretical tools to explain it. I argue that there is no relevant asymmetry even if we accept that the data provide reason in favor of a disparity between retracting moral judgements and retracting personal taste judgements. I conclude, thus, that AS needs not be supplemented with anything else because of it. The plan is as follows: in Section 2, I briefly describe AS's framework and the constitutive norms of assertion that the view endorses. In Section 3, I outline MacFarlane's characterization of retraction and the practical consequences of endorsing the norm of retraction for assertions. Section 4 describes the apparent asymmetry and argues that supplementing AS with more theoretical tools does not do the needed work. In section 5, I argue that there is no relevant asymmetry related with moral and personal taste retractions and that the discrepancy that the data show does not affect AS. I conclude by summarizing my view and saying something more about the debate concerning retraction.
- 2. Assessment-Sensitivity** AS's central claim is that certain sentences are assessment-sensitive. Candidates for sentences that possess this feature can be found in discourse about matters of personal taste, moral discourse, aesthetic discourse, and so on. To say that a sentence is assessment-sensitive is to say that its truth depends not only on features of the context of utterance but also on features of the context from which its use is assessed (MacFarlane 2005; 2014). According to AS, propositions are assessed from contexts of assessment, which are not fixed by any feature of

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the context of utterance, but by the assessor. Since the context of assessment is the context of the assessor, the proposal is not about relativizing truth to an additional parameter provided by some feature of the context of utterance.²

MacFarlane believes that we can make sense of assessment-sensitive truth by considering its role in the norms that govern our assertion practices. Part of his defence of AS therefore consists in spelling out these norms, showing that they do presuppose a relativistic framework like the one he proposes. According to AS, assertions are (partially) constituted by a truth norm. The norm is formulated as follows:

Reflexive Truth Rule (RTR). *An agent is permitted to assert that p at context c_1 only if p is true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_1 .*³

RTR forbids the performance of assertions that are false as used and assessed from the context in and from which they are performed. Nonetheless, the rule does not commit one to claiming that it is wrong to assert a false proposition. If other norms are in play, the rule can be overridden.⁴

Asserting is also “[p]utting a sentence forward in the public arena as true”; this implies that the sentence becomes “available for others to use in making further assertions” (Brandom, 1998, p. 170). If this is so, then there should also be a rule whereby, given certain conditions, the agent is required to remove the sentence she put forward from the “public arena”. The rule may be stated as follows:

Retraction Rule (RR). *An agent in context c_2 is required to retract an (unretracted) assertion of p made at c_1 if p is not true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 .*⁵

According to RR, an agent is only required to retract her assertion that p when, as assessed from the context of retraction, p as used at c_1 is not true. RR captures the agent’s responsibility for putting forth a sentence as true by requiring that she should retract once the sentence is assessed as false.⁶

2 “It is important that the context of assessment is not fixed in any way by facts about the context of use, including the speaker’s intentions; there is no ‘correct’ context from which to assess a particular speech act” (MacFarlane, 2014, pp. 61-62).

3 MacFarlane (2014, p. 102).

4 For a discussion of what it means for constitutive norms to be overridden, see e.g. García-Carpintero (2015).

5 MacFarlane (2014, p. 108).

6 RR is paramount for AS, for it is what pragmatically differentiates it from contextualist theories. As MacFarlane states:

The basic thought is that the pragmatic difference between R[elativism] and C[ontextualism] manifests itself in norms for the retraction of assertions rather than norms for the making of assertions. R[elativism] predicts that an assertion of p at c_1 ought to be retracted by the asserter in c_3 , while C[ontextualism] predicts that it need not be retracted (2014, p. 108).

To clearly see this difference consider the following example by MacFarlane:

Let c_1 be a context centered on ten-year-old Joey, who loves fish sticks. According to both R and C, the proposition that fish sticks are tasty is true as used at and assessed from c_1 . So the Reflexive Truth Rule tells us that Joey is permitted to assert that fish sticks are tasty. Let us suppose that he does. Now consider another context c_2 centered on Joey, ten years later. As a twenty-year old, Joey no longer likes the taste of fish sticks. Here R and C diverge. According to R, the proposition that fish sticks are tasty is false as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 , so by the Retraction Rule, Joey is now required to retract his earlier assertion. According to C, by contrast, the proposition that fish sticks are tasty is true as used at c_1 and assessed from c_2 , and Joey need not retract (2014, p. 109).

3. Retracting Assertions MacFarlane (2014, p. 108) characterizes retraction as the speech act of taking another speech act back. We can make sense of this rough characterization by making it clear what each component of the phrase “a speech act of taking another speech act back” is intended to convey. First, retraction is a speech act – that is, retraction is performed by saying that one is doing so. The usual English expressions for retracting involve the following: ‘I retract that’, ‘Scratch that’, ‘Delete/Erase that’, ‘I was mistaken’. Second, “to take another speech act back” is best understood as targeting the commitments the agent made while performing the speech act she seeks to retract.

This paper is especially concerned with retraction of assertions. When an assertion is retracted, the retractor is no longer expected to stand by it. The commitments undertaken when asserting – for instance, to asserting truthfully or putting forward a sentence as true in the “public arena” – are no longer in play. The retractor is no longer subject to the norms governing the retracted assertion. Consider the example below.

Example 1

Paula₁: My mother’s fish soup is not tasty.

Paula₁₉: My mother’s fish soup is so tasty.

Paula₁₉ is obliged to retract her previous assertion. If she were not to retract, she would be violating RR. To do so would be incorrect, because Paula₁₉ would allow for a sentence that is false – relatively to her present standard of taste – to be available as true for others to use. Given that the contexts of assessment in RTR and in RR differ, it is possible that speakers have a duty to retract an assertion that (until then) violated no norm. “To say that one was wrong in claiming that *p* is not to say that one was wrong to claim that *p*. Sometimes it is right to make a claim that turns out to have been wrong (false)” (MacFarlane, 2011, p. 148). Keep in mind that MacFarlane regards the act of assertion as involving the speaker’s commitment to the truth of the propositional content expressed. Thus, it may be the case that one must retract a correct assertion, i.e. one that violated no norm. The idea here is that the agent ought to update what she has put forth if it turns out to be false.

4. The (Apparent) Asymmetry Concerning Retraction Ferrari & Zeman (2014) identify a (purported) asymmetry regarding retraction in two distinct areas of discourse. On the one hand, the asymmetry has to do with the fact that we generally do not expect personal taste retractors to blame themselves for the gustatory standard they held at the time of utterance. On the other hand, it concerns the fact that we generally *do* expect moral retractors to blame themselves for the moral standard they previously held. To put it more plainly, personal taste retractors usually do not implicitly nor explicitly convey that they regard the standard they held in the past as *the wrong one to have*; by contrast, moral retractors usually implicitly or explicitly convey that they take the moral standard they adopted as *the wrong one to have*.

In order to identify the phenomenon at issue, an example may help.

Example 2

Paula_{t1}: Bullfighting is not wrong.

Albert_{t2}: You said that bullfighting was not wrong.

Paula_{t2}: I was mistaken. Bullfighting is despicable.

According to AS, in retracting her previous assertion at *t*₂, Paula is not necessarily admitting that she was somehow blameworthy for making that assertion. Still, it is a perfectly fine retraction if she retracts while conveying that she was in some sense wrong to assert what she

did – AS allows for such a possibility, since RR is perfectly compatible with it. However, what may be damaging for AS is that there is something more than compliance with RR in the above example: agents generally think that Paula_{t₂} should implicitly or explicitly blame herself for having held the standard she did at t₁. Arguably, we are inclined to consider that the utterance “Bullfighting is despicable” implicitly conveys that idea i.e. that Paula_{t₂} finds any moral standard from which the proposition *Bullfighting is not morally incorrect* is true to be the wrong one to have. If “in many cases we would expect [Paula_{t₂}] to feel ashamed for having held such a judgement” (Ferrari & Zeman, 2014, p. 92), then it seems natural to claim that something else is happening besides the retraction of the assertion itself, namely a disapproval of the standard Paula held at t₁.

MacFarlane (2011, p. 148) distinguishes between making an assertion that violates RTR and retracting an assertion that is no longer true, as assessed from the context of retraction. In a way, retraction signals that the retractor recognizes that “what she said was wrong”. But, this fails as an explanation for what seems to be happening in the bullfighting example. The retractor is expected not just to recognize that “what she said was wrong”, but also that *she should not have said it in the first place*. Thus, the theory appears to lack the appropriate tools to account for what is happening with (presumably) most moral retractions.

Notice, however, that the same does not seem to happen for retractions about matters of personal taste.

Example 3

Hillary_{t₁}: Barnacles are tasty.

Hillary_{t₂}: I was mistaken. Barnacles are awful.

Hillary_{t₂}'s retraction does not implicitly (or explicitly) convey that she finds each gustatory standard from which the proposition *Barnacles are tasty* is true to be the wrong one to have. Arguably, the follow-up “Barnacles are awful” is not used to convey it. More importantly, we would not expect Hillary to convey such a thing.

AS neatly accounts for the case of personal taste retractions. The retractor is only expected to recognize that “what she said was wrong”, and not that *she should not have said it in the first place*. Thus, nothing other than the compliance with RR is going on.

A natural solution to the mystery is to propose some new theoretical device compatible with AS's framework that allows the theory to explain how the asymmetry occurs.⁷ For example, one may claim that in some cases retractors “will access the circumstances in which the assertion was made in evaluating a previous assertion and thus will attempt to retrieve the specific value of the relevant parameter and assess it” (Ferrari & Zeman, 2014, p. 93). This proposal accounts for the possibility that the relevant parameter is assessed as the wrong one. It therefore captures how moral retractors generally assess the assertion (“and the specific value of the relevant parameter”) they are retracting. This also reduces the asymmetry to a simple difference between how frequently the *wrong standard to have* comes about from moral assessments and how frequently it comes about from personal taste assessments.

Additionally, supplementing AS in a way that allows agents not only to assess propositions from their context of assessment, but also to assess parameters of the contexts of assessment they previously held, explains why we would expect some retractions to be accompanied by retractors being overly critical of their previous view on the matter.

None of the data implies that RR does not hold for both personal taste and moral discourses.

⁷ This is what Ferrari & Zeman (2014) do.

Agents are still expected to retract under the conditions that are determined by the rule. No reason was presented to maintain that, if an agent's moral standards change from t_1 to t_2 , and relative to the moral standard held at t_2 what was asserted at t_1 is false, then she is under no obligation to retract.⁸ Quite the contrary, in all the examples provided, agents uphold the rule. Thus, the data presented impinge in no way on RR.

Ferrari and Zeman do not assume that the asymmetry is incompatible with RR. Nonetheless, they feel that AS should explain it. In fact, assuming that the asymmetry as described occurs and that RR is correct, that is the only reasonable worry. However, given the theoretical improvement described above, the worry is yet to be met, for it can be restated as follows: (1) why would we expect that only some retractions (confined to a specific area of discourse) should be accompanied by a criticism of the retractor's previous view on the matter? Answering (1) will shed light on how to interpret the data – and, as we will see, supplementing contexts of assessment with the feature introduced by Ferrari & Zeman provides no help.

5. The Asymmetry Dispelled

In this section, I will directly address (1). The asymmetry is somewhat related with distinct areas of discourse. Thus, it is reasonable to think that, only by investigating the relevant distinct features in each area of discourse, one can formulate an appropriate explanation for the asymmetry. To do so, consider the following examples that should explicitly illustrate the asymmetry.

Example 4

Bill _{t_1} : Abortion is murder.

Bill _{t_2} : I was wrong. No one should think that abortion is murder.

Bill _{t_2} retracts the assertion made at t_1 while being critical of his previous stance on abortion. In such a case, the retractor not only recognizes that his previous assertion is, from the new context of assessment, false, but he also indicates that his previous stance on the matter is the wrong one to have.

Example 5

Gwen _{t_1} : Monkfish isn't tasty.

Gwen _{t_2} : I was wrong. But it's fine if you think that monkfish isn't tasty.

Gwen _{t_2} retracted her previous assertion about monkfish's taste. However, and contrary to Bill's case, she is willing to retract and indicate that the previous stance she held about monkfish is perfectly fine. If you find Gwen's retraction unnatural, imagine that she is talking to her six year old daughter. So, she would be conceding that it is alright for a six year old to hold that monkfish is not a tasty fish.

Examples 4 and 5 purport to provide good reasons for us to endorse the claim that there is an asymmetry related with moral and personal taste retractions. But this is yet insufficient data to support the conclusion that the asymmetry is as we have been describing it thus far.

For instance, one can come up with examples where the moral retractor is not very critical of her previous moral standards and where the personal taste retractor is highly critical of her previous gustatory standards. These cases are interesting, because they provide us with some

⁸ Marques (2015) argues that RR makes the wrong predictions: "to retract a past assertion after a change of perspective (standard of taste) is neither irrational nor insincere" (p. 12).

insights about what the relevant features of highly critical retractions are and thus can help us understand what the apparent asymmetry is all about.

Example 6

Chris_{t1}: It is wrong to lie.

Ruth_{t2}: You said that it was wrong to lie.

Chris_{t2}: I was mistaken. Lying is morally permissible. But there is nothing wrong with thinking that lying is morally wrong.

Chris_{t1} asserted that it was wrong to lie. Chris_{t2} thinks that lying is morally permissible but, since (arguably) no terrible consequence would come about from holding the contradictory view, it is perfectly reasonable for Chris_{t2} to state that his former self did nothing wrong in asserting what he did.

Example 7

Lucy_{t1}: Gordon Ramsay's Beef Wellington is not tasty.

Peter_{t2}: You said that Gordon Ramsay's dish was not tasty.

Lucy_{t2}: I was mistaken. The Wellington is delicious. Whoever thinks that Gordon Ramsay's Beef Wellington isn't tasty is wrong.

In personal taste discourse, there are cases where retraction is accompanied by the speaker being very critical of her former self. Lucy_{t2} is very critical about the gustatory standards she previously held – she cannot believe that she doubted Gordon Ramsay's abilities as a chef. The cases where the retractor is critical of her former self display a common feature: they are clear-cut cases. An agent finds abortion (or bullfighting) either wrong or permissible, Ramsay's Beef Wellington is either tasty or not – one is not usually conflicted about such issues. Less clear-cut cases do not usually involve the retractor being critical of her former self. Distinguishing clear-cut cases from less clear-cut cases allows us to distinguish the examples where we would expect retractors to be critical of their previous views from examples where we would not expect them to be so. Moreover, there is no longer an asymmetry concerning retraction in two distinct areas of discourse. Retraction works in the same way in both areas of discourse – it is just that clear-cut cases are less common in personal taste discourse when compared with moral discourse. To account for this discrepancy one only needs to tell some sociological story about what makes clear-cut cases more uncommon in discourse about taste. Here is an attempt.

Arguably, clear-cut cases are more common in moral discourse because moral issues are usually interpreted as more universalizable than issues concerning personal taste, which seem to depend much more on the idiosyncrasies of individuals. This is an empirical claim about how speakers intuitively view these two areas of discourse. The claim explains that speakers' opinions about taste do not usually involve strong views on gustatory standards – agents do not feel compelled to do so because such matters usually lack universalizability. On the other hand, given that agents think that moral properties are usually universalizable, opinions on such matters usually are accompanied by strong views about moral standards. Also, people seem to give more importance to moral matters than to matters about personal taste – which is consistent with the idea that we have stronger moral opinions than opinions about personal taste.

Whatever the precise explanation is, it is largely irrelevant to our purposes. What is important is that the asymmetry is dispelled. Even granting that the empirical data support the idea that it is more common for moral retractors to be critical of their former selves than it is

for personal taste retractors, it does not follow that we get an asymmetry between moral and personal taste retractions. There actually is none. There is a discrepancy concerning the amount of clear-cut cases in personal taste issues and in moral issues. If so, then it is not the case that AS needs to account for it. The reason is very straightforward: speakers can disapprove their previous standards of assessment in both areas of discourse. This implies that there is no asymmetry and no explanatory gap to be filled. There is quite probably a difference in the amount of clear-cut cases in the moral area of discourse and in the taste area of discourse. But this is to be explained sociologically (i.e. by distinguishing between claims that people find universalizable and claims they do not) and that is beyond our present purposes. The asymmetry is now dispelled. We can thus claim that, because of it, AS requires no theoretical improvements.

6. Conclusion

The Retraction Rule is a crucial component for Assessment Sensitivity. Recently, new data have come to light that undermine the connection between retraction and the falsity of what was originally asserted (e.g. Knobe & Yalcin, 2014). This entails that the rule makes the wrong predictions about when one is required to retract an assertion. In this paper, I assumed that RR makes the correct predictions. Nonetheless, one might claim that such data undermining RR also undermine Ferrari and Zeman's description of the asymmetry. If retractions are not as closely connected with the falsity of what was originally asserted, then, in some of the examples they provide to support the asymmetry, retracting is arguably not mandatory. If so, the claim that there is an asymmetry between mandatory retractions across distinct areas of evaluative discourse is undermined. Given that we have operated on the assumption that RR holds, these considerations will have to be discussed elsewhere.

Still, it is indisputable that retractions *do* sometimes happen, even for the skeptic about RR. The claim that agents behave differently when moral retractions and personal taste retractions are concerned is then of interest, because it tells us that retraction may be more than just admitting the falsity of one's previous assertion; it may involve taking a stance on the values adopted when the assertion was performed – e.g. their holding universally or merely expressing idiosyncrasies, as suggested by the sociological explanation I have proposed.

Note, however, that the skeptic cannot question RR by appealing to the putative asymmetry pointed out by Ferrari and Zeman. For, even granting that there is enough data to support the claim that moral retractions are generally accompanied by retractors being overly critical about their own previous view on the matter while personal taste retractions are not, this does not pose explanatory demands on RR. The assumption (on which we have operated so far) that agents are required to retract under the conditions that the rule determines is not questioned by the putative asymmetry.

Hopefully, I have shown that the asymmetry concerning retraction across two distinct areas of discourse is nothing but apparent. The most we get from the data is a discrepancy on the amount of clear-cut issues in moral discourse and in personal taste discourse, but that is not relevantly related with retraction and, thus, it does not affect AS. The discrepancy can be accounted for by providing a sociological explanation for it, independently of the semantic and pragmatic theories we choose to endorse. In the light of such considerations, supplementing AS with new theoretical tools would be an overreaction to the empirical data on the matter.

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