

CHAPTER FIVE

RADICAL RELATIVISM, RETRACTION AND “BEING AT FAULT”

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1. Introduction

Radical relativism was born with a promise: to account for certain phenomena that opposite views are unable to explain. One example is the phenomenon of “faultless disagreement”, according to which two people, while disagreeing, are not at fault in any substantive way. The phenomena of retraction and assessments of truth in cases of eavesdropping are others. All these phenomena have been claimed to pose serious problems for rival views and be best accounted for within a radical relativistic framework.

While “faultless disagreement” and the notion of disagreement in general has benefited from extensive discussion in current debates over semantic content, retraction has not been in the spotlight that much. In particular, very few things have been said about what retraction exactly amounts to and how to conceive of its normative profile. This will be the focus of our paper.

We will begin by giving an intuitive characterization of retraction by means of some examples (section 2). After presenting the basics of the radical relativist view in section 3, we move to investigating retraction, offering what we take to be some key elements for a substantial analysis of the phenomenon (section 4). Such analysis, we claim, has the virtue of making clear what the normative peculiarity of the notion of retraction is—namely, its retroactive efficacy. In section 5, we inquire into the sense of “fault” in which retractors are said to deem their former selves as not being at fault when making the retracted assertion (MacFarlane 2014). In this connection, we highlight an asymmetry between retractions involving predicates of personal taste and moral terms (section 6). After noting that the epistemic notion of “fault” used by MacFarlane’s cannot explain the asymmetry, in the following section (7) we offer our own explanation, by

appealing to a less discussed dimension of assertion evaluation which we call “circumstance-accuracy”. In section 8 we provide support for such an explanation by taking a cue from the legal domain and show how an important distinction found there can be applied to the case of retracting assertions as well. We flag some issues that our paper opens up for further research in section 9.

2. Introducing retraction: some examples

To a first approximation, retraction is that speech act that an agent performs when she claims “I take that back”—where “that” is taken to refer to a previously unretracted assertoric speech act made by the agent whose content is currently deemed as false. The most effective way to introduce retraction is by looking at some examples of ordinary conversational situations that are taken to illustrate the phenomenon. The examples involve conversational situations about different subject matters, such as epistemic modals, knowledge attributions, judgments of taste and moral judgments:

(1) Epistemic Modals

Sally: Joe might be in Boston.

George: No, he can't be in Boston. I just saw him an hour ago in Berkeley.

Sally: Okay, then, scratch that. I was wrong (MacFarlane 2011, p. 148).

(2) Knowledge Attributions

Judge: Did you know on December 10 that your car was in your driveway?

Sam: Yes, your honor. I knew this.

Judge: Were you in a position to rule out the possibility that your car had been stolen?

Sam: No, I wasn't.

Judge: So you didn't know that your car was in the driveway, did you?

Sam: No, I suppose I didn't, your honor (MacFarlane 2005b, p. 213).

(3) Judgments of Taste

Angelina, in her childhood: Spinach is tasty.

Tom, in present times: You said that spinach is tasty. What about that?

Angelina, in present times: Spinach is not tasty. I was wrong.

(4) Moral Judgments¹

Albert in his childhood: Torturing mice for fun is not wrong.

Lucy, in present times: You thought that torturing mice for fun was fine.
 Albert, in present times: I was mistaken. Torturing mice for fun is wrong.

3. Radical relativism

“Relativism” is a label that covers a variety of different views. Our interest is primarily on a specific kind of relativism—namely, *alethic relativism*. The general idea behind this kind of relativism is that the truth of statements within certain areas of discourse (e.g. moral, aesthetic, epistemic) is relative.

In recent philosophy of language two main versions of alethic relativism have crystallized: a moderate version, championed by Max Kölbel, and a more radical one recently defended by John MacFarlane. The moderate version is construed as a slight departure from the framework pioneered by Kaplan (1989), which already contains relativization of truth to contexts of utterance and circumstances of evaluation—the latter thought of as comprising parameters for possible worlds and times. In the same way in which Kaplan introduced the time parameter in the circumstances of evaluation (although not necessarily for the same reasons), relativists of the moderate stripe urge us to introduce more “unorthodox” parameters such as various kinds of standards—e.g., standards of taste, moral standards, aesthetic standards, epistemic ones—each pertaining to a specific area of discourse.²

The second, more radical version of relativism holds that, besides relativization to contexts of utterances and circumstances of evaluation, truth needs to be relativized to a third factor, namely what MacFarlane (2003) has dubbed “contexts of assessment”. The proposal, in a nutshell, is that truth-value is a function of parameters fixed by the context of assessment. A context of assessment is, roughly, any context in which the content of a given sentence is evaluated for its truth or falsity.

Like in moderate relativism, the contribution of a certain parameter to determining the truth-value of an utterance of a sentence containing the relevant expression comes via the circumstance of evaluation with respect to which such an utterance is evaluated.³ However, unlike moderate relativism, in the radical version the value of the relevant standard is *not* established (or, to use MacFarlane’s technical term, *initialized*) by the context of utterance, but by the context of assessment. The main contrast between the two relativisms is thus the following. In the moderate version an utterance has a once-and-for-all settled truth-value even though there might be variation in truth-value among utterances expressing the same content in different contexts. In the radical version this is not so: the truth-

value of an utterance depends crucially on the values of the relevant parameter that are established by the context of assessment – the context of utterance is not enough to determine that value. Thus, not only is there a variation in truth-value of different utterances that express the same content in different contexts; there is also a variation in the truth-value of *the same utterance* from one context of assessment to another. It is in this sense that MacFarlane’s relativism is “more radical” than the Kölbelian version.

As we have mentioned, retraction has been taken by radical relativists to favor their view over competitor views. Here we will illustrate how retraction has been thought to raise a problem for the moderate version of relativism. There are two points to be made in this respect. Despite their different definitions of utterance-truth, moderate relativism and radical relativism yield similar predictions when it comes to the assertion norms prescribed by each view: given that in performing an assertion the context of utterance and that of assessment coincide, no normative difference will result.⁴ But the difference comes out when we consider retraction: here the two views make different predictions with different normative import. The difference can be seen in their respective norms of retraction:

(MRRN)

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_1

(RRRN)

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 ,

where c_1 and c_2 are the context of utterance and the context of assessment, respectively.

We can easily see that moderate relativism is ill equipped to explain the peculiar normative profile of retraction. By (MRRN), one should retract at a context of assessment only if a previous assertion is not true as used and assessed at the context of utterance. In other words, such norm predicts that one ought to retract assertions that were already incorrect because in violation of the assertoric norm. In a slogan: according to (MRRN) you ought to retract what you should not have asserted in the first place. Moreover, abiding by (MRRN) will not force retractors to retract a previous assertion if its content is true relative to the circumstances in play at the context of utterance, even if it is false relative to the circumstances in play at the current context of assessment. The normative profile characteristic to retraction remains unexplained. Thus,

for instance, according to (MRRN) Albert in present times would be required to retract his assertion made in his childhood that torturing mice for fun is not wrong just in case the content expressed by that assertion was false according to Albert's moral standard when he was a child. But assuming that Albert's moral standard in his childhood deemed torturing mice as morally permissible, (MRRN) predicts that Albert is currently under no obligation to retract his previous assertion, regardless of whether he now believes that it is immoral to torturing mice for fun.

On the other hand, the radical version of relativism is well equipped to handle the normative profile of retraction. By (RRRN), one should retract a previously unretracted assertion at a context of assessment if the content it expresses is not true as used at the context of utterance and assessed *at that context of assessment*. This gives retraction an interesting normative role to play. Despite the fact that my previous asserting that p was correct, because in compliance with the assertion rule, I ought to retract that assertion if p is false as evaluated from my current context of assessment. According to MacFarlane this provides a strong reason, albeit not conclusive, to prefer radical relativism over its moderate rival.

4. Retraction: towards an analysis

As we have noted above, the ability to account for retraction plays a dialectically crucial role for establishing the superiority of radical relativism over its rivals. However, despite its importance in the current debate, a thorough analysis of retraction is still lacking. Our aim in this section is to take a few steps towards such an analysis.

A first thing to note is that the examples given in section 2 involve two subjects that dialectically interact in conformity to the following pattern: there is a challenge issued by one subject to an assertion performed in some past context by the other subject, who replies by accepting the challenge and by retracting the assertion. Insofar as retraction is a speech act performed by an agent with some conversational aim, it presupposes an audience with some common conversational background. However, the aspect of dialectical confrontation between two subjects, and the presence of an actual dispute among them, is not an essential feature of the phenomenon. It is rather a heuristic device that makes the confrontational aspect more explicit. The examples could have been formulated in such a way as to involve just one agent and a non-interactive audience in a context in which both the retracted assertion and the motivation the agent has for retracting are publicly available.⁵

The conversational situations presented above have been taken by radical relativists to instantiate the very same phenomenon: what Sally, Sam, Angelina and Albert are all doing is to *take back* their previous assertions on the basis of the fact that their respective standards are different from the ones had while making them. And the way they do this is by explicitly admitting that there is something wrong with their previous assertion, a sense of wrongness that is characteristically associated with the act of retracting and which will be clarified in due time.

The intuition is that what Sally, Sam, Angelina and Albert are doing in reply to the challenge posed by their respective interlocutors is the most natural and sensible thing to do, given the specific conversational circumstances they find themselves in. We will not take issue with whether this intuition is in fact as widespread as radical relativists claim.⁶ We just assume that the phenomenon is real. Our aim is instead that of providing some elements for its analysis.

4.1. Retraction and disagreement

It is not unusual to hear philosophers in informal conversation about retraction claiming that such a phenomenon simply amounts to a disagreement with one’s former self. However, it’s not clear what this means exactly. A further step towards an analysis of retraction is to clarify what the relation between retraction and disagreement is.

To this end, two preliminary remarks about disagreement are in order. The first is that, as many philosophers have recently observed, disagreement seems to consist in a variety of, probably heterogeneous, phenomena rather than neatly falling under a unique type.⁷ However, although the project of clarifying the relation between retraction and the various kinds of disagreement discussed in the literature is certainly worth pursuing, we will restrict our attention to only one variety of disagreement: *doxastic* disagreement. Roughly, doxastic disagreement involves two subjects, A and B, that either have the same doxastic attitude (say, belief) towards two logically incompatible propositions, or they have two incompatible doxastic attitudes (say, belief and disbelief) towards the same proposition.⁸

The second remark concerns an ambiguity in the term “disagreement” brought to the fore by Cappelen and Hawthorne’s (2009) distinction between disagreement as state and disagreement as activity. Thus, the word “disagreement” might refer to *the act of disagreeing* which is part of an actual dispute over a certain subject matter; alternatively, it might refer to *the state of being in disagreement*.

Disagreement as a state does not require the presence of an actual dispute. It concerns the relation between the doxastic states of two or more subjects, independently of their actually having, or having had in the past, a dispute about the subject matter of the disagreement. If Thales believed that water is an element and Cavendish believed that water is not an element, then they state-disagree even though one was living in Ancient Greece, between the VI and the V century BC, and the other was living in England during the 18th Century.

Disagreement in the act sense requires the existence of a dispute. Following Egan (2010), we might characterize a dispute in the following way: two parties to a conversation assertively utter two (at least *prima facie*) incompatible judgments which they take to be in conflict. Then they engage in a process of argumentation and negotiation with the aim of reaching a common opinion, which both parties are prepared to sincerely assert and to accept, while rejecting its negation. Now, it is important to note that the kind of incompatibility in question might be only *prima facie*, and thus that the associated sense of conflict (however we want to exactly characterize it) involved in the dispute might be entirely apparent. For instance, it might be caused by some features of the conversational situation they are in, or by the fact that they are using some of the relevant words in their statements in a different way. Thus we might distinguish between merely verbal dispute, where the conflict is only apparent, and genuine disputes, where the conflict is real—i.e. grounded in disagreement in state. Two subjects are disagreeing in the act sense just in case they are engaging in a genuine dispute.

What is then the relation between retraction and disagreement? Roughly put, whenever a subject S is under a deontic requirement to retract an assertoric speech act with content *p*, it is required that S's current doxastic state is in disagreement in the state sense concerning *p* with her previous doxastic state at the time in which the assertoric speech act was performed. However, and quite intuitively, there is no sense in which retraction involves disagreement in the act sense.

4.2. MacFarlane on retraction

With these clarifications at hand we can now turn to the task of providing a minimal analysis of retraction. We will begin our analysis from some elements provided by MacFarlane's (rather sketchy) characterization of retraction. He writes:

By "retraction", I mean the speech act one performs in saying "I take that back" or "I retract that." The target of a retraction is another speech act,

which may be an assertion, a question, a command, an offer, or a speech act of another kind. The effect of retracting a speech act is to “undo” the normative changes effected by the original speech act (MacFarlane 2014, p. 108).

In this paper we are primarily interested in the phenomenon of retraction as targeting assertoric speech acts, and we will thus leave the discussion of cases of retractions of questions, commands or offers for another occasion. Concerning the effect of retracting assertoric speech acts, MacFarlane writes:

[I]n retracting an assertion, one disavows the assertoric commitment undertaken in the original assertion. This means, among other things, that one is no longer obliged to respond to challenges to the assertion (since one has already conceded, in effect), and that others are no longer entitled to rely on one’s authority for the accuracy of this assertion (MacFarlane 2014, p. 108).

Some observations could be made starting from these quotes. First, retracting is not mere refraining to re-assert. We can in fact distinguish between no longer being willing to assert that *p* and retracting an earlier assertion that *p*. I might in fact refrain to (re)assert a proposition in cases in which, for instance, I move from a conversational situation in which it is perfectly appropriate to assert that *p*, to a situation in which, for purely pragmatic reasons an assertion of *p* would be deemed as totally inappropriate. Thus, despite the fact that in the new context I still believe the proposition to be true and justified, I refrain to assert it because aware of the fact that some pragmatic factors pertaining to the new conversational situation would make an assertion of *p* inappropriate. However, in refraining to assert that *p*, I am not thereby retracting my previous assertoric speech act as made in a context where it was appropriate to assert that *p*. On the contrary, it is totally legitimate for me to stand by that assertion, as made in such context, and to keep all the normative commitments associated with it. As a consequence, a challenge issued in the new context of an assertion of *p*, if I were to perform it in there, wouldn’t necessarily pose a challenge to my previous assertion as made in a less demanding context, unless such challenge suggests that *p* is false.

Second, retracting is not just re-assessing the content of an assertion as a result of a change of mind. It requires more than that. It requires an additional speech act in which we claim that we take that assertion back. In fact, it is only by performing the speech act of retraction that we

disavow the normative commitments undertaken with our previous assertion. After all, we might simply ignore our obligation to retract especially if we think that nothing hinges on that.

In addition, other important features of retraction could be discerned. For one thing, retraction always involves two contexts, or conversational situations: one in which the original assertoric speech act is made and another in which the retraction is performed. The specific assertoric act targeted by an act of retraction is performed at an earlier time. Thus, retraction is diachronic and retrospective.

Moreover, retraction is generally autocentric.⁹ An act of retraction performed by S characteristically targets another speech act performed by *S herself* at an earlier time.¹⁰ Another important feature of retraction is that it needs to be public. In order for an act of retraction to be effective in disavowing the normative commitment undertaken with the previous assertion, the act needs to be made public; it requires an audience that formally acknowledges your intention to take distance from all the normative commitments you undertook with your previous assertoric speech act.

4.3. The retroactivity of retraction

As MacFarlane says, in retracting an assertion, one disavows the assertoric commitment undertaken in the original assertion. This is taken to be the most significant trademark of the normative profile of retraction. But how should we understand this sense of disavowing the assertoric commitments?

Asserting a proposition, *qua* public speech act addressed to a specific audience, is, among other things, making oneself responsible for the truth of that proposition (Peirce 1934). This sense of making oneself responsible is associated with a network of commitments that in making an assertion a subject undertakes.

Without going into details here, such a network is constituted by: (i) a commitment to vindicating the assertion (by providing grounds for its truth, or perhaps by deferring to someone else who can) when it is appropriately challenged; (ii) a commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts or reasons on the basis of the assertion when it proves to be false; (iii) a commitment to promote the assertion over alternative (and incompatible) judgments, when appropriate; (iv) a commitment to step back from an assertion or endorsement of the assertion whenever the evidence available does not support it to a sufficient degree.¹¹ It is, of course, possible that not all these commitments are always associated with

any particular assertoric act. In fact, which commitments are associated with a particular act might depend on specific features of the situation of assertion as well as on features of the content of the assertion.

One way we think the sense of disavowal involved in any genuine act of retraction could be clarified is by appealing to a concept employed in jurisprudence—i.e. the concept of *retroactivity*. The claim is that a fruitful way to understand the normative effect that an act of retraction possesses is to say that retracting has some kind of retroactive efficacy. Roughly, the idea of retroactivity is the following: a law (or an act) has retroactive efficacy if it alters the legal (or normative) status of acts that were performed before the new law (or the act of retraction) came into existence. Thus, in these general terms, an act of retraction of a previous assertoric act has retroactive efficacy with respect to that act insofar as it alters the normative status of it.

As we have said, the effect of retracting a previously unretracted assertion is that of undoing the normative changes effected by the original assertoric speech act. This means, among other things, that the subject is no longer required to respond to any challenge to the assertion which has been retracted and also that she is no longer responsible for the consequences of acting on the basis of that assertion. To briefly illustrate this point: if you decide to go to the pub to meet Smith on the basis of my previous assertion that Smith is at the pub after I publicly retracted that assertion, and you do not find Smith, I am not to be deemed responsible for your being disappointed. In fact, my aim in retracting is exactly that of stepping back from such network of commitments. And this is exactly the sense in which retraction is retroactive. We will come back to this feature of retraction in section 8.

5. Retraction and “fault”

In section 4.2 we have listed several characteristics of retraction that could be used in forging a more complete notion and have underlined what we take to be its most important feature: its retroactive character. In this section we explore further its normative character. How should we think of the normative character of retraction? A good place to start is to inquire into the sense in which MacFarlane uses the notion of previous assertors being or not being at fault. Although subjects retract previous assertions whose content is deemed false, MacFarlane argues, this “is not tantamount to conceding that one was at fault in making [them]” and “[r]etracting is not admitting fault” (MacFarlane 2014, p. 110). What notion of “fault” is at stake here and what exactly does being at fault amount to? In this

section we will focus on precisely this question.

A first step towards addressing this question is to have a closer look at the dialogues with which we exemplified retraction in section 2. The phrase that expresses the retractor's attitude towards her previous assertion is "I was wrong". Let's try to see in what sense MacFarlane understands speakers to use this phrase in common speech. As a general rule, MacFarlane claims,

[I]t is important (...) to distinguish retracting an assertion from claiming that one ought not to have made it in the first place. 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).

And, commenting on the example involving epistemic modals given above, he says:

If you find it implausible that Sally would say "I was wrong" in the dialogue above, make sure you're not interpreting her as saying "I was wrong to say that." Of course she wasn't wrong to say what she did. But what she said was wrong, and that is what she is acknowledging (MacFarlane 2011, p. 148).

In these quotes MacFarlane distinguishes between two dimensions along which an assertion could be evaluated. One dimension concerns "what is said", understood here as the truth-evaluable content of the assertion. Assertors are thus at fault along this dimension when what they say is false as assessed from the current context. Another dimension concerns the saying—the assertoric speech act—*itself*. Assertors are at fault along this dimension when there is something wrong with the assertoric act itself, regardless of whether the content is true. According to MacFarlane's indications about how to interpret the locution "I was wrong", in the example considered above, Sally judges her previous self as being at fault with respect to "what is said", but not with respect to the saying itself.

Distinguishing these two dimensions of being-at-fault certainly helps in clarifying the issue. However, a new question arises regarding the sense in which retractors are said not to be at fault with respect to their assertoric speech acts themselves. What exactly is then the sense of fault applied to assertoric speech acts that MacFarlane is operating with? The following passage may give us some additional hint:

Suppose one’s evidence all strongly suggests that Uncle Jack is coming to lunch, and on the strength of that evidence you assert that Uncle Jack is coming. A bit later, Aunt Sally calls to say that Uncle Jack has broken his leg. This makes it quite unlikely that he is coming, so you retract your assertion. Nonetheless, you were perfectly reasonable in making it, and cannot be criticized for having done so. Retracting it is not admitting fault (MacFarlane 2014, p. 110).

Here the sense in which retractors are said to not be at fault is distinctively epistemic, having to do with one’s available evidence, asserting on the basis of which makes one reasonable (or rational) even if what is said turns out to be false.

The epistemic sense of “fault” that MacFarlane is employing here is not what we want to take issue with in the remainder of the paper. We think it is indeed highly plausible that retractors might not be at fault in this sense.¹² However, we wonder whether there are other dimensions of assertion evaluation along which retractors could be said to be (or not) at fault—fault, or lack thereof, that cannot be traced down to the epistemic notion used by MacFarlane. In particular, we think that the epistemic notion of fault is not enough to explain a certain asymmetry that has been found between retractions involving predicates of personal taste and retractions involving moral terms.

6. An unexplained asymmetry

The asymmetry alluded to above between retractions involving predicates of personal taste and moral terms consists in a difference in the *attitude* retractors have towards their former selves in the two cases. Although this issue has not been paid much attention to,¹³ we find that pretty often an attribution of falsity to a certain moral claim contains a (mostly implicit) criticism of the very moral standard from which the claim is issued. Thus, in retracting a moral claim on the basis of its falsity (relative to the moral standard of the context of assessment) the retractor is implicitly criticizing the moral standard previously held in the context in which the assertion was made. On the other hand, we find that this doesn’t happen that often in the taste case. In retracting a taste claim on the basis of its falsity (relative to the taste standard of the context of assessment) the retractor need not implicitly commit to a criticism of the gustatory standard previously held in the context in which the retracted assertion took place.¹⁴

To make the difference in retraction between the moral and the taste case more vivid, we will try to pump intuitions by appealing to dialogues

that sound natural to us. To start with, consider the following retraction involving a predicate of personal taste—a slight modification of the original dialogue presented in section 2:

TASTE

Angelina, in her childhood: Spinach is tasty.

Tom, in present times: You said that spinach is tasty. What about that?

Angelina, in present times: Spinach is not tasty. I was wrong. However, there's nothing bad with liking spinach.

In this dialogue, Angelina uses the locution “I was wrong” to signal that she retracts her previous assertion. But, as the continuation makes clear, she refuses to cast fault on her former self for having the standard of taste she had when the assertion was made, despite the fact that she now holds a different one, which mandates her retraction in the first place.

Now, contrast TASTE with the retraction below, involving a moral term—again, a slight modification of the initial dialogue presented in section 2:

MORALITY

Albert in his childhood: Torturing mice for fun is not wrong.

Lucy, in present times: You thought that torturing mice for fun was fine.

Albert, in present times: I was mistaken. Torturing mice for fun is wrong. No one should be that cruel to animals.

As Angelina in TASTE, Albert uses the locution “I was mistaken” to signal that he retracts her previous assertion. But, in contrast to TASTE, the continuation makes clear that Albert is disposed to cast fault on his former self for having the moral standard he had when the assertion was made. In fact, in many cases we would expect Albert to feel ashamed for having held such a judgment.

How is this asymmetry to be explained? Before proceeding to offer our explanation, let us note that the epistemic dimension of assertion-evaluation MacFarlane proposes is not able to explain the asymmetry. According to the epistemic notion of fault, neither Angelina in TASTE nor Albert in MORALITY should be judged as being at fault, since (we can stipulate) nothing went wrong in either case from an epistemic point of view. But if the dialogues presented above track a real phenomenon, the fault that Albert bestows upon his former self and the fault that Angelina refuses to bestow upon her former self cannot be explained by mere appeal to an epistemic notion of fault.¹⁵

7. Circumstance-accuracy

What notion *would* provide an explanation of the asymmetry? The fact that the epistemic notion of “fault” fails to offer an explanation shows that we need to make room for a different dimension of assertion evaluation that allows for a difference in the attitude retractors have towards their previous selves. As it is perhaps obvious in the examples above, such a dimension is one that has to do with the inter-contextual assessment of the values of the parameters in play at the context in which the retracted assertion has been made. Although retraction need not be accompanied by a great deal of reflection, it is nevertheless the case that many retractors will reflect on the circumstances in which the retracted assertion has been made. Such a *reflective retractor*, as we will call her, 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. Such an assessment of the specific value of the relevant parameter will be connected with the evaluation of both the assertion itself and its content. We call this dimension of assertion-evaluation “circumstance-accuracy”.¹⁶

Now, the retractors’ assessment of the specific value of the relevant parameter in play at the circumstances in which the retracted assertion has been made is usually accompanied by a judgment of their previous selves as being at fault or not for endorsing such a value. In other words, in retractions done by reflective retractors (such as Angelina and Albert in TASTE and MORALITY above), besides evaluating the content of the assertion as false, a new dimension of evaluation opens up for retractors, one that might involve substantial criticism of the retractor’s previous self in virtue of the fact that the standard held when the assertion was made is judged to be “the wrong one to have”. More needs to be said about how exactly to understand the notion of “the wrong standard to have”, and thus to make the notion of circumstance-accuracy more precise, but here we rest content with giving this intuitive characterization. What is sure, and what constitutes the explanatory advantage of such a notion, is that it involves an attribution of a different kind of fault to the retractor’s previous self (clearly different from MacFarlane’s epistemic understanding of “fault”). We take this notion of fault to be characteristic of certain acts of retraction made by reflective retractors, and thus part and parcel of the phenomenon of retraction itself.

To see in more detail how appealing to circumstance-accuracy helps account for the difference in the attitude the two retractors have towards their former selves, let us go back to the retractions in TASTE and

MORALITY above. As we have seen, in TASTE Angelina uses the locution “I was wrong” to signal that she retracts her previous assertion. Being what we called above a “reflective retractor”, she accesses the circumstances in which the retracted assertion was made and attempts to retrieve the specific value of the relevant parameter and evaluate it – in this case, her previous standard of taste, according to which spinach falls in the set of tasty things. But, as the continuation makes clear, she refuses to cast fault on her former self for having that standard of taste, despite the fact that she now holds a different one, which mandates her retraction in the first place. There need not be any relation of superiority between that standard and her current one (and this is a case in which we take there to be none). Thus, there is no basis for her to evaluate her former self having that standard as being at fault. This is the sense of “fault” in which Angelina can be said not to be at fault when retracting a previous assertion. Whatever the other dimensions along which she might deem her former self as being at fault, she is not at fault when it comes to circumstance accuracy.

Now, we have seen that in Angelina’s case the standard she held when the retracted assertion was made was found not to be “the wrong one to have”. But, as we have seen with MORALITY, this does not happen in all cases. Like Angelina in TASTE, in MORALITY Albert uses the locution “I was mistaken” to signal that he retracts his previous assertion. Being a reflective retractor, he accesses the circumstances in which the retracted assertion was made and attempts to retrieve the specific value of the relevant parameter and evaluate it—in this case, his previous moral standard according to which torturing mice for fun falls in the set of acts that are morally permitted. But, in contrast to TASTE, the continuation makes it clear that Albert is disposed to cast fault on his former self for having had that moral standard. In this case there is a relation of superiority between that standard and his current one, so Albert has a basis to evaluate his former self as being at fault—the standard he had is “the wrong one to have”. Not only does Albert find his former self at fault along other dimensions (truth, accuracy, etc.), but he also finds himself at fault when it comes to circumstance-accuracy.

Thus, in short, appealing to circumstance-accuracy makes room for a different dimension of assertion evaluation, one that is different from the epistemic dimension used by MacFarlane and one within which the asymmetry between the moral and the taste case can be explained. To further support the thought that circumstance-accuracy is an important notion to have in the philosopher’s explanatory toolkit, in the next section we turn to a feature of retraction that we have highlighted in section 4:

namely, its retroactive character. Taking a cue from the legal domain, we show how an important distinction found there can be applied to retractions as well. Not only we find this distinction illuminating for the study of the particular features pertaining to retractions in different domains, but we think the distinction buttresses the idea that circumstance-accuracy is a stable feature of retractions in general.

8. Retraction and the law: strong and weak retroactivity

In his paper “Retroactive Law”, Stephen Munzer (1977) analyses the concept of retroactivity in jurisprudence and draws a distinction between weak and strong retroactivity of a law. Under the weak interpretation, a retroactive law changes the normative status of a previous act, but does so only on a forward-looking basis. This means that the retroactive efficacy of the new law changes the legal (normative) status of an act performed before the enforcement of the law only from the time in which the law is officially enforced. To illustrate the idea of weak retroactivity, consider the following scenario:

Case 1: S performs an act A at t_1 that is lawful according to the law in force at t_1 . At t_2 ($t_2 > t_1$) a new law is promulgated the enforcement of which has retroactive efficacy which makes A unlawful. The act performed by S at t_1 is from t_2 onward unlawful, but S is not indictable for the consequences of that act prior to t_2 ; only for those posterior to t_2 .

The new law has retroactive efficacy because it changes the legal status of an act that was executed before the time in which the new law was enforced. But it is weakly retroactive because its normative efficacy only concerns the consequences of that action posterior to the enforcement of the law.

On the other hand, under the strong interpretation of retroactivity, a retroactive law changes the legal (normative) status of a previous act both on a backward-looking basis as well as on a forward-looking basis. This means that under the strong interpretation, once the retroactive law is enforced, all acts performed before the new law that are targeted by that law change their legal (normative) status not only from the time in which the new law is enforced but also with respect to the lapse of time in-between the targeted act and the enforcement of the law. Consider the following example:

Case 2: S performs an act A at t_1 that is lawful according to the law in force at t_1 . At t_2 a new law is promulgated with retroactive efficacy which makes A unlawful. The act performed by S at t_1 changes its status and becomes unlawful not only from t_2 onward but also with respect to the lapse of time between t_1 and t_2 . Thus, S is indictable for the consequences of A prior to t_2 as well as for those posterior to t_2 .¹⁷

The law has retroactive efficacy because it changes the legal status of an act performed before its enforcement. But it is strongly retroactive because the change is done both on a backward-looking basis as well as on a forward-looking basis. This means that its normative efficacy concerns the consequences of that action that are both posterior and anterior to the enforcement of the law.

Let us consider a fictional example that might help grasping the difference between the two readings of the retroactivity of a law. Suppose that a pharmaceutical company in January 2013 advertises a new diabetes drug (call it “drug-X”) making unsupported safety claims over its product. Although the company was aware of the fact that such safety claims were quite unsupported, insofar as the regulations concerning the safety of pharmaceutical products at that time were rather loose, the commercialization of that product was deemed as legal according to the law in force in January 2013. The advertising campaign was extremely successful and many people affected by diabetes took drug-X. However drug-X had serious side-effects, causing long-lived health problems to many patients, who had to spend quite a lot of money on medical treatments to counter its side-effects. In January 2014, a new law is promulgated the enforcement of which has retroactive efficacy which makes the commercialization of drug-X unlawful. Drug-X is immediately withdrawn from the market. In addition the new law forces the company to pay for all the medical treatments that are demonstrably associated with drug-X. According to the weak interpretation of retroactivity, the company has to pay only for those treatments that patients who took drug-X still require after the new law was promulgated. On the other hand, under the strong reading of retroactivity, the company is forced to pay for both the treatments that are still needed by patients after the promulgation of the law, and all the treatments associated with drug-X that patients had to do in the lapse of time between the commercialization of the product and the enforcement of the new law.¹⁸

We think that the distinction between weak and strong retroactivity can be extended to the case of retraction. Thus, there is a kind of retraction with weak retroactive normative efficacy by means of which the agent intends to disavow the assertoric commitments associated with the

targeted assertoric act only on a forward-looking basis. And there is a kind of retraction with strong retroactive normative efficacy by means of which an agent intends to disavow the assertoric commitments associated with the targeted assertoric act both on a forward-looking and a backward-looking basis.

The idea is, then, that this way of understanding retroactivity and the difference in normative reach that a retroactive law can have under the weak and strong interpretation might provide a good model not only for understanding the kind of normative efficacy that an act of retraction might have with respect to the kind of commitment the subject has undertaken with her original assertoric act, but it might also help us explaining the asymmetry between the two cases illustrated in the previous section. If we are right in claiming that, contrary to the moral case where an act of retraction is implicitly critical of the very moral standpoint from which the retracted assertion was made, retraction in the taste case need not have this feature of criticism of one’s previous sensibility, then it seems that the strong and weak interpretation of retroactivity might turn out to be particularly useful in modeling and understanding this asymmetry concerning the normative reach of an act of retraction in the two domains.

Thus, the strong interpretation of retroactivity seems to be appropriate with respect to the moral case where in retracting a moral assertion we not only give up the normative commitments associated to the previous assertoric act from the time of the retraction onward, but also, in implicitly criticizing the standard held by the subject in the context where the assertion was made as the wrong one to have, we want to distance ourselves from all the normative consequences associated with the assertion even in the lapse of time between the asserting and the retracting. The thought is that that assertion was never in good shape because issued by a wrong standard. In this respect, a substantive attribution of fault seems to be involved in any act of retraction targeting a moral assertion. We blame ourselves for having asserted a proposition that is false because it is grounded in the wrong moral standard. And, in this respect, we want to distance ourselves from all the assertoric commitments associated with that assertion and withdraw our responsibility from all the consequences that follow from such commitments (both *post* and *ante* our retracting). In this respect the strong interpretation of retroactivity applies in the moral case. What we aim at doing is to distance ourselves from the normative commitments associated with the targeted assertion not only on a forward-looking basis but also on a backward-looking basis. We want to say that making such an assertion was a bad thing to do – and not just because

false from the current perspective, but because issued from a moral standard that we evaluate as the wrong one to have.

The contrast with the taste case is sharp. Here the weak interpretation of retroactivity seems the most appropriate since no implicit criticism to the previous standard of taste is associated with an act of retraction. In retracting a previously unretracted assertoric speech act we want to distance ourselves from the assertoric commitments on a forward-looking basis, and this is because we evaluate the content of such assertion as false from our current perspective. But because we do not take our retraction to be implicitly critical of our previous standard of taste, there is no reason for us to distance ourselves from the assertoric commitment also on a backward-looking basis. After all we are not licensed to conclude that that assertion was the incorrect one to make. In fact, we should consider that assertion as perfectly permissible in the past since grounded on a perfectly legitimate taste sensibility. In this sense, retractors can deem their former selves as not being at fault in a stronger sense than the epistemic one preferred by MacFarlane.

9. Summary, conclusions and further issues

Radical relativists have claimed that accounting for retraction is an advantage their view has over rival positions. Despite the dialectical importance of the phenomenon, not much attention has been paid to it in the literature. Our aim in this paper has been to fill this gap by offering some key elements that would form the basis of a more thorough analysis. We have also inquired into the sense of “fault” in which retractors can be said not to be at fault in retracting. In this connection, we have pointed towards an asymmetry between retractions involving predicates of personal taste and moral terms and have attempted to provide an explanation of this asymmetry. Our explanation has led us to a less explored dimension of assertion evaluation—*circumstance accuracy*—appeal to which provides an explanation of the aforementioned asymmetry. In the last part we sought to give support to the thesis that *circumstance accuracy* is the right notion to appeal to by borrowing a distinction found in jurisprudence between weak and strong retroactivity and by applying it to the case of retraction.

There are some issues that our paper both contributes to and opens up for further research. Despite a common core of features that makes them what they are (which we attempted to unveil in section 4), retractions come in many forms that might vary with, among other factors, the type of discourse they appear in. We have seen this in the case of retractions in the

moral and taste domains, but we have only scratched the surface here. A more thorough examination of the features of retraction pertaining to those, and other, domains¹⁹ well exceeds the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, we take our highlighting, discussion and explanation of the asymmetry between retractions in the moral and taste domains to contribute to this project – alongside with aiming to provide the basis for a more complete characterization of retraction in general.

Other issues that might be fruitfully inquired into are connected with the notion of circumstance accuracy. Not only a deeper philosophical understanding of this notion is desirable, but, we think, it is also important to clarify the relation between this dimension of assertion evaluation and other such dimensions—for example, truth, accuracy, or the epistemic one used by MacFarlane. It would be interesting to see how this relation pans out in the case of each of the views that purport to account for retraction, and to compare the results. In particular, since we are dealing with radical relativism here, it would be interesting to see how circumstance accuracy relates with the (relativized) notions of truth and accuracy such a view employs. At a first glance, circumstance-accuracy seems to lack the exclusively assessor-oriented character those other notions have. Whether or not this is a problem for radical relativism is a question that we leave for another occasion. We hope that our characterization of the phenomenon of retraction and the explanation of the asymmetry between retractions in the moral and taste case will provide a fertile ground for further discussion.

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Notes

¹ MacFarlane doesn't consider moral judgments to be apt for relative truth. But we see no obstacle in extending the framework to cover also the moral domain. After all, relativism is a very well represented meta-ethical view, and much discussion about relativism in the last century or so comes exactly from that neighborhood.

² Moderate versions of relativism have been proposed, among others, by Kölbel (2004) for evaluative predicates in general, by Kompa (2005) for “know”, by Recanati (2007) for meteorological verbs and by Brogaard (2008) for moral terms.

³ We are using here the term “utterance” in a loose and semi-technical way. For the sake of precision we should use the term “occurrence” instead and thus be sensitive to Kaplan's distinction between utterances and occurrences of sentences (see Kaplan 1989, pp. 522-523). For the purpose of this brief exposition of Kölbel's and MacFarlane's proposals, however, we ignore this subtle distinction.

⁴ As Wright (2012, p. 441) points out, this can be contested on the basis that the two views make slightly different predictions about the possibility of expressing the faultlessness of the disagreement from within a committed perspective.

⁵ Can there be retraction at the level of thought? Our worry with such a phenomenon is that, lacking the public aspect of a paradigmatic act of retraction, it might turn out to be a different phenomenon than that investigated in this paper. We leave the question whether there are any genuine cases of “mental retraction” aside in this paper.

⁶ Retraction data haven't been unanimously accepted in the literature. In the case of epistemic modals, for example, von Fintel and Gillies (2011) question the solidity of the retraction data by providing examples in which the speaker stands by her previous claim instead of retracting it. See, however, MacFarlane (2014, chapter 10) for a response to von Fintel and Gillies' examples. For worries about retraction data in general and its philosophical significance, see Wright (2007).

⁷ Witness, for example, MacFarlane's (2014) pluralist take on the issue.

⁸ The kind of incompatibility at issue here is what MacFarlane calls “noncotenability”: “I disagree with someone's attitude if I could not coherently adopt that same attitude (an attitude with the same content and force) without changing my mind – that is, without dropping some of my current attitude.” (MacFarlane 2014, p. 121)

⁹ For the distinction between *autocentric* and *exocentric* uses see Lasersohn (2005).

¹⁰ This is not always the case though: take the case of a spokesperson that is in charge to make some claim on my behalf. He asserts that *p* and in so doing he undertakes some normative commitment on my behalf. I might legitimately retract that very speech act even in cases in which I've never asserted that *p*. But such cases are rather exceptional.

¹¹ This account of assertoric commitment is broadly in line with that advocated in earlier work by MacFarlane (see, for example, MacFarlane 2005a), which is, in turn, inspired by Brandom's (1983) account.

¹² Note, though, that appeal to relative truth is not needed in order to explain this

sense of faultlessness. Any theory of truth that has the resources for distinguishing between truth and (non-idealized) justification would be in a position to account for it. We don't insist on this point since nothing important for our project hinges on it.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the various differences in terms of normativity between moral judgments, comedic judgments and judgments of taste see Ferrari (2014, chapter 3).

¹⁴ See Ferrari (ms) for a non-relativistic account of truth in the taste domain that is compatible with this non-critical attitude of retraction in the taste domain and, more generally, it is able to account for the main normative differences between disagreements as they occur in the moral and in the taste domain.

¹⁵ Nor can it be explained by appeal to the notion of accuracy that MacFarlane uses (for the radical relativist definition of accuracy, see MacFarlane 2014, p. 127). Since accuracy is very closely related to truth, a retractor will not only deem the content of an assertion false, but also inaccurate (relative to context of assessment occupied by the retractor). So, both Angelina and Albert's retracted assertions will be deemed as inaccurate by the radical relativist and thus they will both be judged as being at fault. Accuracy is thus of no use in explaining the asymmetry between the moral and taste case.

¹⁶ We think that our notion of circumstance-accuracy bears some resemblance to a notion that is implicit in Sundell's (2011) discussion of various types of disagreement—in particular, what he calls “context-disagreement”. However, we are not exploring here disagreement along the assertion dimension we dub “circumstance-accuracy”, nor are we claiming that ordinary disagreement involving a sentence and its negation should be interpreted as disagreement about the context the interlocutors are in.

¹⁷ As Munzer himself notes, the strong interpretation does not suppose that a retroactive law obliterates the past. Such a law does not mean that the pre-enactment status never existed—nor does it make the consequences of the applications of the previous law unlawful during the period in which it was in force. A retroactive statute making legal an act that was once criminal would rarely entitle a person to recover damages for false imprisonment.

¹⁸ It is important to not be distracted by the following disanalogy: in the law cases briefly sketched here the retroactivity of the law has the effect of *attributing* legal responsibility to agents for acts performed before the enforcement of the law; whereas an act of retraction has typically the effect of *disavowing* the normative commitments of a previous assertoric act. But the presence of this disanalogy is a mere artifact of the way in which we introduced and discussed the notion of retroactivity in the legal case. Although concrete examples of retroactive laws that have the legal effect of disavowing an agent from the legal responsibility of an act performed before the enforcement of the law are harder to find, they are certainly possible.

¹⁹ See Krabbe (2001) for a previous discussion of the different forms retraction takes across discourses.