BOOK REVIEWS

Mathias Frisch, *Causal Reasoning in Physics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. viii +256 pp.

In 1913 Bertrand Russell argued that contrary to what most of us presume, the causal structure of the world is not fundamental, that is, that there is no temporally asymmetric relation of causal determination, production, or influence built into the fundamental fabric of reality. His argument was that causal notions had been eliminated from physics in favor of time-symmetric, fundamental laws. Causation should be pushed aside as a relic, he said, of a bygone era. Cartwright's (1983) influential critique of Russell's position convinced many that causal eliminativism, in the form that Russell defended it, is not supportable, because causal structure plays a functional role in practical reasoning that cannot be played by nomological relations. Causal pathways identify strategic routes to bringing about ends, and a law-like relationship between A and B does not entail that A-ing is a way of bringing B about. So, for example, bad breath is correlated with tooth decay as a matter of physical law (since both arise with the presence of bacteria in the mouth), but taking breath mints is a not a strategic route to preventing tooth decay.

By making it clear that what Russell identified as the physical replacements could not play the functional role of causal beliefs in practical reasoning, Cartwright renewed interest in causal relations. There have been important developments in recent decades in understanding causal relations. There has been progress in understanding what causal claims add to structures like laws and probabilities. Formalisms have been developed for representing causal claims in science. Methods of causal inference and discovery have been developed. But among physicists and philosophers of physics, the dominant position on the ontology of causal relations remains that—contrary to what philosophers and scientists took for granted for centuries—causal structure is not part of the fundamental fabric of the physical world. This is the position that Frisch calls the "anti-causalist" position. His book is intended as a counterpoint to the prevailing anticausalism. His aim is, in his own words, "to show that, contrary to what appears to be the received wisdom among philosophers of physics, causal structures play a legitimate role in physics" (21).

By causal structures, Frisch means asymmetric structures represented by directed acyclic graphs (DAGs) that play the practical role that Cartwright ident-

ified, indicating strategic pathways for bringing about ends. Frisch has been a gadfly in the discussion of causation in the foundational literature in physics. This book brings together arguments that he has been advancing against particular anticausalist programs into a single, sustained critique of the anticausalist position. It is the most careful and comprehensive treatment of causal reasoning in physics to date. The first chapter is an introduction to the historical backdrop, separating the strand of discussion in the philosophical literature that he is contributing to from related philosophical projects, and setting up the discussion that follows. Chapter 2 sketches a general pragmatic account of scientific representation. The generalized pragmatism is an undercurrent running through the whole text. It tempers too strong a metaphysical reading of Frisch's conclusions. The next two chapters give a systematic survey of anticausalist arguments found in, or suggested by, the literature. These arguments point to features that make causal representations applicable in the special sciences but are purportedly absent from physics. Chapter 3 considers arguments that causal representation depends on coarse graining or a distinction between causes and background conditions. Frisch argues that these are both in fact features of representation in physics as well. Chapter 4 considers arguments that draw on the interventionist account of causal structure. According to interventionists, causal claims are to be understood in terms of their implications for the results of hypothetical interventions, and they have argued that since our fundamental theories deal with the universe as a whole, the notion of an intervention is inapplicable, so causal relations simply do not arise. Here Frisch responds that even an interventionist can make sense of causal claims applied to the universe by generalizing the notion of intervention to apply to hypothetical interventions that set the initial state of the world at some forced value.

Chapter 5 addresses the most prominent and influential anticausalist argument: the contrast between the asymmetry of the causal relation and the symmetry of the fundamental laws. Frisch argues that standard patterns of reasoning even in fundamental physics depend on asymmetric causal assumptions, as a matter of practical necessity. Local inferences from known data employing only laws are too weak to draw even rudimentary conclusions, so physical inferences rely on patterns of causal reasoning. Chapters 6 and 7 examine two examples of time-asymmetric causal reasoning in physics: linear response theory and classical radiation theory. Frisch shows that there are different ways to express the causal assumptions implicit in the inferential patterns that he exhibits: as a causal Markov condition (which states that any node in a DAG is conditionally independent of its nondescendants, given its parents), or as an assumption of microscopic randomness in the initial—but not the final—state of a modeled system. Which of them is to be thought of as the "base" or "root" assumption, that is, the one that supports all of the others and explains why they hold? Frisch views them as two sides of the same coin. For him, these

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two assumptions are interchangeable with one another, and also with the claim that the world is causally structured.[1]

I found the attempts to articulate arguments that physics is incompatible with causal representation and physics strained. The thought of the anticausalists was not that physics is *incompatible* with causal representation but that we don't *find* causal structures at the fundamental level of physical description. The most valuable part of the book is the demonstration that causal reasoning plays an indispensable role in many contexts even in fundamental physics. That lesson should remain at the forefront of the discussion of the status of causal notions.

In foundational discussions in philosophy of physics surrounding causation, almost everyone accepted Cartwright's observation that causal beliefs play an indispensable role in practical reasoning. The question for neo-Russellians in the wake of Cartwright's critique is what physical facts (about the world, on the one hand, and ourselves, on the other) support the formation and use of causal beliefs? Chapter 8 is a discussion of the two most influential forms of neo-Russellianism: (i) the views of Barry Loewer and David Albert, which link causal structure to the thermodynamic gradient, and (ii) the views of Huw Price and James Woodward, which link causal notions to agency and manipulation. On a neo-Russellian view, causal structure isn't eliminated but demoted from the fundamental ordering principle of the world to a network of emergent relations exploited by situated agents in strategic reasoning. Differences among neo-Russellians can be easily seen as differences in emphasis rather than substance, with Price and Woodward emphasizing the facts about us and our position in the world that make causal beliefs indispensable and give them their role in practical reasoning, and Albert and Loewer emphasizing physical asymmetries in the environment that provide the external infrastructure for causal reasoning. There is a lively and ongoing debate between Frisch and the proponents of these programs over details, but I had trouble isolating a substantive disagreement. Frisch says that the neo-Russellian view is reductive and his own is not, but there is nothing in his arguments that challenges the neo-Russellian conviction that physics has eliminated causal structure from its account of the fundamental fabric of the physical world. Frisch's defense of the indispensability of causal *reasoning* appeals to epistemic limitations on the part of agents and is entirely compatible with the neo-Russellian metaphysics. He does say in chapter 9, where he sums up his conclusions, that he sees no reason to think that causal structure is any *less* fundamental that the causal Markov condition or the initial randomness condition, but this is where his pragmatism about scientific representation becomes important. The metaphysics is explicitly deflationary, and he does not

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1. The functionalism and pragmatism defended in chapter 2 come into play here. For Frisch, if the structures that support causal reasoning are present, then the world is causally structured.

seem to be defending causal fundamentalism in the sense that the early Russell and the neo-Russellians are concerned to deny—namely, the view that the fundamental fabric of the world incorporates asymmetric relations of causal production or determination.

If there is a divide between Frisch and the anticausalists, I suspect that it has to do more with the sorts of projects in which they are engaged. Frisch is doing philosophy of science. He is interested in how the world is represented in our physical theories. The book is an extended argument for the conclusion that the *only* way in which physics has moved beyond causal representations is in *principle*, and even then, only in the totalistic models of a closed universe. It remains as true as it ever was that, in practice, the aim of a large part of science, including physics, is the investigation of the causal skeleton of the world. Anticausalists like Loewer, Albert, Russell, and Price, by contrast, are engaged in naturalistic metaphysics. They are interested in the metaphysical lessons that physics holds for us about the fundamental structure of the universe. When they claim that causes have been eliminated from physics, they mean that it is no longer recognized as part of the fundamental fabric of nature.

As physics becomes increasingly abstract, concepts that are basic and indispensable in the worldview of a situated agent disappear from the fundamental level of physical description and become targets of analysis. They get recovered in a project that places agents in the foreground and looks at how human representations are structured to help them cope with a complex and changing world. Questions about whether causal relations fall on the side of the world or on the side of the agent no longer have a simple answer. We have emergent structures in the agent's environment on the side of the world, and a functional role on the side of the agent. And we would do better to ask: what is it about the way the agent couples to the world that allows *those* structures to play *that* role for agents like us?

In a recent essay for *Aeon* magazine, Frisch (n.d.) wrote an essay about causation whose subtitle is "Either cause and effect are the very glue of the cosmos, or they are a naive illusion due to insufficient math. But which?" If we've learned anything from the discussion of causal relations since Russell's essay, it should be that physics has moved beyond this simple dichotomy, revealing the physical infrastructure that supports the human ability to identify and use structures in the physical environment as strategic pathways to bringing about ends.

Overall, this is a terrific book. It represents the best kind of engagement between philosophy of science and metaphysics, going beyond the simplified schemas that often appear in metaphysicians' representations of physics to real instances of physical reasoning. It also reflects a very welcome move away from the global models of a closed universe that tend to attract philosophers' attention to the models of open subsystems that capture the bulk of the attention of the practicing physicist. The standard of discussion is very high, and debate

about the status of causal structure has been considerably sharpened and significantly advanced by it. The take-home lesson of Frisch's book—that causal reasoning is just as indispensable in physics as it is in other sciences—is an important one that needs to be made.

References

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Anthony Simon Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi +283 pp.

Anthony Simon Laden's *Reasoning: A Social Picture* investigates how we reason with each other in conversation about what to do, value, believe, or feel. I know of no other book that brings this neglected topic so squarely into focus and explicates it so thoroughly. Laden does not think of reasoning together as merely an understudied topic of interest, however; he thinks that "reasoning is fundamentally something we do together" (16). Fully appreciating this fact, Laden argues, requires us to abandon a set of assumptions about reasons and reasoning that he calls the "standard picture." Thus *Reasoning* pursues two distinct projects. The first is to investigate the nature and norms of the activity of reasoning together in conversation. The second is to argue that the "standard picture" is inadequate and ought to be replaced by a theory of reasoning that is social from start to finish. In my opinion, the book succeeds much more in the first of these projects than it does in the second.

　　Begin with the first project. The body of the book (chaps. 3–6) is spent explicating the elements and standards of the activity of reasoning together. The

primary move in this activity, as Laden understands it, is an invitation "to take what we say as speaking for our interlocutors as well" (10–11). Much of Laden's discussion consists of unpacking this idea: asking what it takes for one to genuinely *invite* one's addressees to take what one says as a reason, rather than commanding, lecturing, or manipulating them (118–22). What emerges is a set of norms we must meet to count as genuinely reasoning *together* rather than "merely side-by-side" (20). Laden investigates the norms of three activities: casual conversation (chaps. 3–4), reasoning together (chap. 5), and particularly end-directed bouts of reasoning he calls "engagements" (chap. 6). The commonalities between the norms of these activities are more important than their differences. Each activity has norms of three broad types: norms of intelligibility, norms of sincerity, and norms of responsiveness.

Laden pulls surprisingly rich content out of the norms of intelligibility and sincerity. Intelligibility requires not just that we speak in meaningful and comprehensible ways but also that our reasoning is not "entirely idiosyncratic and not open to anyone else to follow" (150). This leads Laden to an insightful discussion of the role of social isolation in schizophrenic delusions (151–55). When discussing sincerity, Laden argues that it is not enough to just believe what you say: "sincerity requires further that one have a sufficiently stable and unified self for which one's words can speak" (135). This motivates a suggestive argument for the claim that reasoning with others requires us to maintain integrity and unity in ourselves (217–28).

The norms of responsiveness concern how we respond to our interlocutors in conversation and reasoning. To be speaking *with* you rather than merely *at* you, I must be open to being moved by what you say and, in particular, make my proposals answerable to your acceptance or criticism (14–15). An important part of this norm is a requirement of *equality*: to be genuinely conversing or reasoning together, we must accord each other equal standing to influence the course of the conversation and what reasons are accepted within it (see 117–32, 157–60, and 165–68). Laden investigates the obstacles to equality created by unjust social structures in which "those with power get to decide, unilaterally, where they stand" (123). By shaping our conceptual schemes in ways that determine "what routes of criticism and argument are within the bounds of reason, and which are confused or special pleading or just 'silly'" (124), such social structures can deprive the marginalized from having the ability to understand their own experience, articulate and express it, or be taken seriously when they do (124–26).[1]

Laden's analysis also suggests a compelling diagnosis of what is bad about inequality when it does happen: "When our idle conversation takes place against the background of inequality, it easily ceases to be a genuine con-

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1. This part of Laden's discussion could be usefully brought into conversation with Miranda Fricker's (2007) work on testimonial and hermeneutic injustice.

versation. And while a world without genuine conversation would be a duller and flatter world, it would also be a world where we don't engage in the very activity that constructs shared spaces of reasons. In such a world, we can't live together but merely side-by-side" (131). The problem with inequality of power in reasoning is not merely that it leads to biased judgments or suboptimal distributions of goods but rather that it blocks an intrinsically valuable form of human interaction: living together. This idea strikes me as right on target and worth exploring further.

Let us now turn to Laden's second project, which aims to show that a proper understanding of reasoning together motivates a wholesale rejection of several standard assumptions about reasons. Laden's critique of the "standard picture" takes up both the beginning (chaps. 1–2) and end (chaps. 7–9) of the book. I cannot review all of Laden's arguments here; instead, I will focus on the two major points that I found to be most problematic.

The first of these points concerns the relation between reasoning and decision making. As we have seen, one of the central norms of reasoning together is openness to criticism from others. To be fully open to criticism, Laden argues, we must never regard a reason that we have offered or a conclusion that we have drawn as the final word on the matter (15). From this, Laden concludes that we must give up on the idea that "reasoning is directed towards reaching a conclusion, a solution or a decision that, *inter alia*, brings the episode of reasoning to an end" (25). In turn, this means we must abandon the idea that reasons aspire to decisively determine what we do, that reasons can *bind*, *necessitate*, *require*, or *obligate* us to perform a certain action or adopt a certain attitude (51). Instead, we should firmly separate the activity of reasoning from the process of making judgments and decisions: "though reasoning can prepare the ground for conclusions and decisions, the actual drawing of such conclusions is not part of the activity of reasoning, but goes beyond it" (38).

To see the problem with this proposal, recall that reasons are always reasons *for* something: a reason is a consideration that *supports* or *weighs in favor of* some action or attitude. If you say that the fact that donuts are sugary is a reason, I will not understand what you mean until you tell me what it is a reason *for*: to eat donuts, or avoid them? But the responses that reasons support are none other than conclusions and decisions: to perform this action, to adopt this attitude, to make that judgment. And if we allow that the reasons for these conclusions can be weighed against one another, then we must accept that sometimes there will be one conclusion that is more supported by the reasons than any other—that is, that sometimes a particular conclusion is *decisively* supported by our reasons. Thus I doubt that there is a coherent way of understanding reasons on which they do *not* "aspire to decisiveness" (55): to separate reasons from the decisions and judgments they support is to deprive them of content. Moreover, it is far from clear that openness to criticism requires us to refrain from ever drawing conclusions on the matters we reason about. As Laden

himself acknowledges, we can make a decision while still "leav[ing] open the possibility to revisiting the question should objections or further evidence be brought forward" (55). Laden seems to think that this way of remaining open to criticism is not enough, but he never fully explains why.[2]

My second point concerns the final three chapters (chaps. 7–9), in which Laden attacks another feature of the "standard picture": "the assumption and insistence that the question of what reasons there are be answered independently of how they are deployed in actual stretches of reasoning" (205). Laden argues for the ambitious conclusion that there is no prior fact of the matter as to what reasons we have that we can bring to bear when reasoning. Instead, we can give a complete account of our reasons by asking "what sorts of responses might continue the activity of reasoning and what sorts of responses would mark its degeneration into other activities, such as commanding and deferring" (206). The resulting account is a mix of voluntarism and coherentism: some of the reasons that apply to us do so because we have chosen them by treating them as reasons in our reasoning (208–13); other reasons apply to us because we must respect them in order to be coherent in ourselves or respect others' need for coherence (237–51). Laden's account thus faces the same difficulty that any broadly coherentist account faces: it seems like *any* way of evaluating reasons that is internally coherent and jointly chosen will be permissible by the norms of reasoning together, no matter how disconnected from reality or morality it may be.

Though aware of this worry, Laden does not find it particularly worrying, as he thinks that it stems from a misguided desire to be armed with an argument that no rational creature could fail to accept (215–17). But this response misunderstands the objection. The problem with a theory that imposes too few constraints on our reasons is not that it leaves us without an argument that would convince the moral or epistemological skeptic; it is that it leaves us nonskeptics with almost no guidance as to what to believe or do ourselves. Reasoning, on Laden's picture, is like a game that has no rules other than to play fair and keep playing: it would be hard to know how to play such a game, since almost anything could be a permissible move. Perhaps reasons on Laden's view are not quite this unconstrained; but much more work needs to be done to show that we can derive substantive and plausible first-order ethical and epistemological judgments from the norms of reasoning together alone, without appealing to independent theories of what is good, what is right, what the evidence supports, and so on.

Laden's most important insight, I think, is that when we are reasoning together, it is not enough just to get the facts right about what reasons we have: it also matters *how* we go about doing so. There are procedural requirements on excellence in reasoning together over and above the substantive requirement of

2. Titus Stahl (2012) raises similar worries in his review of *Reasoning*.

getting our reasons right: the norms of intelligibility, sincerity, and responsive-ness are examples. Since reasoning together is rightly one of the things that we value, we have strong reason to conform to these procedural requirements—for example, by not silencing one another, by maintaining our own integrity, by striving for equality. But this need not imply that conforming to these pro-cedural requirements is the only thing we should value, or that these require-ments are the only source of our reasons. This is, I think, how we should understand the contribution of this book: not as a failed attempt to overthrow the entire standard picture of reasons but as a valuable first step toward illumi-nating an important corner of the space of reasons, one that has too long been left in the dark.

References

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John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. ix +344 pp.

This is an impressive book. It presents a bold and original theory with clarity and precision and applies that theory to a number of topics of philosophical interest. The level of discussion is consistently high.

The book defends a version of relativism about truth. Although relati-vism has had a long history in philosophy, it has not—at least not until recently—received sustained attention from analytic philosophers. But in the last decade or so, philosophers and linguists have been debating the merits of a new brand of relativism, one couched in formalisms familiar from formal semantics. John MacFarlane has been one of the most prominent and able

defenders of this approach, and *Assessment Sensitivity* represents the most recent and most comprehensive presentation of his distinctive brand of relativism.[1]

The first part of *Assessment Sensitivity* ("Foundations") is largely devoted to explaining what relativism is and to setting out what sort of evidence is needed in order to establish relativism for a given area of discourse. The second part of the book ("Applications") then argues in detail for a relativist treatment of a number of philosophically interesting expressions: taste predicates, knowledge ascriptions, future contingents, and epistemic and deontic modals.

Although many of these ideas have appeared previously in MacFarlane's widely read articles, this book nevertheless constitutes a significant contribution to the literature. The explication and defense of the foundations of relativism is clearer and more detailed than what can be found in the earlier papers. The discussion of particular expressions has been refined and contains responses to significant objections. A final chapter addresses an important challenge that MacFarlane had not previously discussed in detail: whether it can be rational for an agent to speak an assessment-sensitive language.

While the book focuses on the debate between relativism and its rivals, much can also be learned from what MacFarlane has to say along the way about a number of other topics, including the nature of context sensitivity, the relationship between formal semantic theories and actual language use, and the relationship between semantics and metaphysics. And often at the core of MacFarlane's compositional semantic proposals for particular expressions are innovative ideas that are independent of relativism per se. But this review will focus on the distinctive brand of relativism developed and defended in the book.

To understand MacFarlane's version of relativism, it will help to remind ourselves of a familiar theory of how the content and truth value of a sentence can depend on the context in which it is used. Relative to a context of use c, a sentence S expresses a proposition (I will use "$|S|^c$" to denote the proposition expressed by S in c). Our semantic theory pairs sentences (relative to contexts) with propositions, and tells us under what conditions a proposition is true at a circumstance of evaluation. What MacFarlane calls the *postsemantics* (58) then provides a definition of *truth at a context*: a sentence S is true at a context of use c iff $|S|^c$ is true at the circumstance of evaluation determined by c (77). What a *circumstance of evaluation* is depends on how we think of propositional truth. If propositions are true or false only relative to a possible world, then a circumstance of evaluation will be a possible world; if propositions are true or false only relative to a possible world and a time, then a circumstance of evaluation will be a

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1. Other exponents of the "new relativism" include Kölbel (2002, 2004), Richard (2004), Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson (2005), Lasersohn (2005), and Stephenson (2007).

pair of a world and time; and so forth.[2] The circumstance of evaluation *determined by a context c* results from setting each parameter of the circumstance to the value of the corresponding parameter of the context. So if, for example, circumstances of evaluation are pairs of worlds and times, the circumstance of evaluation determined by a context c will be the pair consisting of the world of c and the time of c. Although the notion of *truth at a context* is usually defined only for sentences, MacFarlane extends this definition to propositions, as follows: given a sentence S and context c, the proposition $|S|^c$ is true at c iff $|S|^c$ is true at the circumstance determined by c (78).[3]

MacFarlane's version of relativism comes into relief when we compare it with more familiar contextualist theories. A simple version of contextualism about "tasty," for example, might say that, relative to a context of use c, the sentence "Chili is tasty" expresses the proposition that chili meets the standard of taste possessed by the speaker of c at the time of c. Here it is assumed that propositions receive a truth value relative to a possible world. According to this view, when I say, "Chili is tasty," I assert the proposition that chili is tasty according to my present standard of taste; when you utter the negation of that sentence, you assert the proposition that chili is not tasty according to your present standard.

This sort of contextualism—which MacFarlane calls *ordinary* or *indexical contextualism*—has been subject to several objections in the literature in connection with its predictions concerning disagreement and (object language) truth and falsity ascriptions. For example, it appears that this view will predict that, in the above case, you and I do not disagree about whether chili is tasty since the proposition I asserted is compatible with the one that you asserted.

In response to problems like this, some authors advocate adopting a view that moves in the direction of MacFarlane's theory, a view that is often called "relativism" in the contemporary literature. On the view in question, propositions receive a truth value only relative to a possible world and a standard of taste. Thus, circumstances of evaluation are pairs consisting of a possible

2. What if one thinks that, fundamentally, propositions are true or false *simpliciter*, not true or false *relative* to anything (for example, see Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009)? Even if this is right, we can define the notion of *truth at a world* in terms of the notion of truth *simpliciter*, as follows: a proposition p is true at a world w iff had w obtained, p would have been true. One might be able to explain *truth at the pair of a world and time* in a similar manner. But if circumstances of evaluation contain more exotic parameters, things might get trickier. See note 4.

3. MacFarlane's definitions of sentential and propositional truth at a context differ slightly from the ones given in this paragraph, in order to accommodate his view that, in a branching time framework, a single context might be contained in multiple possible worlds (77). I ignore this complication for the sake of simplicity.

world and a standard of taste.[4] The circumstance determined by a context c will consist of the world of c and the standard of taste possessed by the speaker of c at the time of c in the world of c (call this "the standard possessed by the speaker at c"). On this view, "Chili is tasty" expresses the same proposition at every context of use, though whether that proposition is true at a context will depend on the standard possessed by the speaker at that context. So on this view, when I utter, "Chili is tasty" and you utter, "Chili is not tasty," I assert a proposition that is incompatible with the one you assert, in the sense that there is no circumstance of evaluation at which both are true. Advocates of this view argue that this enables them to better accommodate the data concerning disagreement and truth and falsity ascriptions. One reason this view might be considered a version of relativism is that the proposition that chili is tasty might be true relative to my standard (at the present time, in the actual world) but false relative to yours (at the present time, in the actual world).

But MacFarlane thinks that this view—which he calls *nonindexical contextualism*—does not cross the "philosophically interesting line" between relativism and absolutism (60). His reason for saying this is that, for any context c, the ordinary contextualist and the nonindexical contextualist will agree on whether $|$ "Chili is tasty" $|^c$ is true at c: both hold that $|$ "Chili is tasty" $|^c$ is true at c iff chili meets the standard possessed by the speaker at c. They agree on this despite disagreeing over the nature of the proposition expressed by "Chili is tasty." More generally, for any context c and any simple taste sentence S, the ordinary contextualist and the nonindexical contextualist will agree on whether $|S|^c$ is true at c.

Why does MacFarlane think that agreement on this point is so significant? Because it is the notion of *truth at a context* that has "direct pragmatic relevance," at least for contextualists (53). For example, contextualists might hold that the notion of *truth at a context* plays a role in characterizing the constitutive norm of assertion:

> **Contextualist Assertion Rule**. An agent in context c is permitted to assert proposition p only if p is true at c (101).

And that notion may also play a role in characterizing the constitutive norm for retracting previously made assertions:

> **Contextualist Retraction Rule**. An agent in context c_2 is required to retract an (unretracted) assertion of proposition p made at c_1 if p is not true at c_1.[5]

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4. As mentioned in note 2, the strategy of explaining truth at a circumstance in terms of truth *simpliciter* becomes more difficult if circumstances include parameters like standards of taste.

5. MacFarlane does not set out a rule like this explicitly, but some of his remarks suggest that he is concerned with versions of contextualism that endorse a rule like this;

It is these rules that bring the contextualist's account of *truth at a context* into contact with the behavior of actual language users.

Now if we combine these rules with either of the foregoing contextualist views, we get the following prediction. If A is permitted to assert $|$ "Chili is tasty" $|^c$ in c, then the above retraction rule will not require her to retract that assertion in a later context c', even if her tastes change between c and c' in a manner unfavorable to chili.[6] More generally, the ordinary contextualist and the nonindexical contextualist will agree on every question concerning when one is permitted to assert a simple taste claim and when, having made such an assertion, one is required to retract it.[7]

MacFarlane's brand of relativism—*assessment sensitivity*—is different. One way to characterize his view is that the notion with "direct pragmatic relevance" is not the notion of *truth at a context of use* but rather the notion of *truth at a context of use and a context of assessment*. A context of assessment is simply any situation in which one might potentially assess an assertion; metaphysically speaking, it is the same sort of entity as a context of use (60–61). The assessment relativist and the nonindexical contextualist may share a similar *semantic* theory, that is, they may agree on which sentences are paired with which propositions, and the conditions under which a proposition is true at a circumstance of evaluation. Where they will disagree is in the postsemantics; instead of the definition of truth at a context provided above, the assessment relativist will offer the following definition of *truth at a context of use and a context of assessment*:

A proposition p is true as used at c_1 and as assessed at c_2 iff p is true at the circumstance of evaluation determined by (c_1, c_2). (90)

To understand this definition, we need to know how a pair of contexts determines a circumstance of evaluation. Like the nonindexical contextualist, the assessment relativist (about taste predicates) holds that propositional truth varies over possible worlds and standards of taste, and so holds that circumstances of evaluation are pairs of possible worlds and standards of taste. MacFarlane thus offers the following account of how a pair of contexts determines a circumstance of evaluation:

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see, for example, p. 225. In what follows, I restrict my discussion to versions of contextualism that endorse this rule.

6. Note that, according to nonindexical contextualism, A will not be required in c' to retract her assertion of $|$ "The chili is tasty" $|^c$, despite the fact that, in c', she will rightly regard that proposition as false.

7. At times, MacFarlane overstates the similarity between ordinary and nonindexical contextualism. For example, he writes that nonindexical contextualism "would agree with ordinary contextualism on every question about the truth of sentences" (89). But as Kölbel (2015) points out, this is not so: the two will, for example, differ over the truth value of some object-language truth and falsity ascriptions.

> The circumstance of evaluation (w, s) is the circumstance of evaluation determined by (c_1, c_2) iff w is the world of c_1 and s is the standard of taste possessed by the agent of c_2 at the time of c_2 in the world of c_2. (90)

Note that each context plays a role in determining a component of the circumstance: the context of use c_1 fixes the world component, while the context of assessment c_2 fixes the standard of taste. This reflects the fact that, in determining the truth of a simple taste proposition, it will be the assessor's tastes (at the time of assessment) that matter, not necessarily the speaker's.

Now the crucial difference between assessment relativism and its rivals, according to MacFarlane, emerges when we look at the norms governing language use. The assessment relativist holds that the following two norms are partly constitutive of assertion and retraction (respectively):

> **Relativist Assertion Rule**. An agent in context c is permitted to assert proposition p only if p is true as used at c and as assessed at c. (103)

> **Relativist Retraction Rule**. An agent in context c_2 is required to retract an (unretracted) assertion of proposition p made at context c_1 if p is not true as used at c_1 and as assessed at c_2. (108)

As MacFarlane observes, given this rule for assertion, it follows that, for any context c, the relativist will agree with the contextualist on whether an assertion of $|$ "Chili is tasty" $|^c$ is permitted in c: both will agree that such an assertion is permitted only if chili meets the standard possessed by the speaker of c at the time of c at the world of c (105). According to MacFarlane, the difference— indeed the *only* "practical difference"—between nonindexical contextualism and relativism emerges when we examine *the conditions under which retraction is required* (107–8). For when combined with the above two rules, assessment relativism predicts that there will be cases in which an agent A is permitted to assert $|$ "Chili is tasty" $|^c$ in c (because chili meets the standard of taste she possesses at the time of c) but is then required to retract that assertion in a later context c' (because her standard of taste changes between c and c' in a manner unfavorable to chili). It is this pattern of permissible assertion followed by required retraction that differentiates assessment relativism from nonindexical contextualism.[8]

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8. Of course, a nonrelativist might attempt to accommodate MacFarlane's data by claiming that the norms of assertion and retraction ought to be stated in terms of (for example) justified belief, rather than in terms of truth or knowledge. The nonrelativist might then attempt to account for that fact that A is permitted to assert $|$ "Chili is tasty" $|^c$ in c and required to retract it in c' by claiming that A was justified in believing that proposition in c but is no longer justified in believing it in c'. This view seems most plausible if combined with an objectivist approach to taste claims, a version of which MacFarlane discusses and rejects (2–7).

Although MacFarlane does discuss truth and falsity ascriptions and disagreement, he places greater emphasis on retraction. The issue of truth and falsity ascriptions does not differentiate between assessment relativism and nonindexical contextualism, and so does not get to the heart of the matter (106–7). And while MacFarlane does believe that the assessment relativist treatment of disagreement is better than what the nonindexical contextualist can offer, he doesn't appear to put much weight on this point (132–33). In a sense, then, what MacFarlane's proposal boils down to is the claim that the **Relativist Retraction Rule** is the (or a) constitutive norm of retraction. Whether this is empirically plausible for taste claims and the other expressions MacFarlane discusses is a matter of controversy; MacFarlane argues his case in detail in the second half of the book. But I want to focus on a different question: why is it, according to assessment relativism, that one should retract an assertion that one was permitted to make in the first place?

Often one retracts a past assertion so as not to continue to risk misleading the audience one was addressing at the time of the assertion. Suppose Jones asserts on the stump that his political opponent engaged in voter fraud in 1985, and then later learns that this is not in fact true. The explanation for why Jones ought to retract his assertion will presumably involve the fact that it has the potential to mislead others about his opponent's past actions. Or suppose that I, aware of your gluten allergy, tell you that there is no gluten in a certain dessert on the restaurant's menu. I then come to realize that I don't know for sure that the item in question is gluten free. Here again the explanation for why I ought to retract my assertion is that my assertion has the potential to mislead you about something important.

But the assessment relativist doesn't appear to be in a position to offer a similar explanation for why we ought to retract assertions that we were permitted to make in the first place. For suppose that, in context c, A is speaking to B, and A asserts | "Chili is tasty" |^c. Given the proposed rule of assertion, A's assertion is permitted only if chili meets the standard of taste that A possesses in c. Let us suppose that A's assertion was in fact permissible, that is, chili really did meet A's standard in c. Now if c is a normal context, then B presumably knows under what conditions A's assertion complies with the rule of assertion, and B will assume that A is attempting to comply with that rule. So B can infer that A believes that chili meets the standard that A possesses in c. If B deems A reliable on this matter, then B can infer that chili in fact meets the standard that A possesses in c.

Now suppose A's tastes change between contexts c and c', so that | "Chili is tasty" |^c is false as used at c and as assessed at c'. The **Relativist Retraction Rule** obliges A to retract the assertion she made in c. But why, exactly, should she do this? It's not that A has risked misleading B. For the belief that B formed on the basis of A's assertion was the belief that chili met the standard of taste that

A possessed in c, and this belief is presumably still true.[9] So the change in A's standard of taste doesn't affect the truth of the belief that B formed on the basis of A's assertion.[10]

Perhaps A ought to retract in c' not because she risks misleading B but simply because she ought to signal to B that her standard of taste has changed between c and c'. Given MacFarlane's rule of retraction, A's retracting her assertion would indeed send out such a signal. But A could also accomplish this by making the following speech in c': "My standard of taste has changed. Chili is not in fact tasty. What I said earlier was false." On MacFarlane's view, this does not amount to a retraction: a retraction involves explicitly saying, "I take that back" or "I retract that" (108). A retraction targets a previous speech act, not (or not only) the content of that speech act. So we still lack an explanation for why we ought to retract in the cases of interest. Thus, even if MacFarlane is right that our practice of retraction is governed by the **Relativist Retraction Rule**, perhaps it is a practice that we have reason to abandon.[11]

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9. MacFarlane avoids calling beliefs "true" or "false," preferring the terms "accurate" and "inaccurate" (125). Furthermore, he holds that these notions are not absolute: a belief is only accurate or inaccurate relative to a context of assessment (129). But the content of the belief in question is not assessment sensitive, and so it does no harm to call that belief true *simpliciter*.

10. We can stipulate that B has no relevant background beliefs about how A's post-c tastes are likely to evolve, so B will not form any false beliefs about A's standard of taste in c'.

11. In section 12.2 of *Assessment Sensitivity*, MacFarlane argues that it makes sense, given our interests, for us to speak a language in which knowledge attributions are assessment sensitive, and he intends those remarks to generalize to the other expressions he discusses (310). But it is hard to bring what he says on that point into contact with the question I have been pursuing in the last few paragraphs, since he says little about retraction in that section of the book.

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Dominic Scott, *Levels of Argument: A Comparative Study of Plato's "Republic" and Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics."* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. vi +235 pp.

This marvelous comparative study of Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is devoted to a single point of comparison—namely, the question whether ethics rests on metaphysics, and, if so, whether the proper study of ethics requires understanding its metaphysical basis.

Scott writes, "It is striking that, in their different ways, both Plato and Aristotle base their practical philosophies on claims about human psychology, our place in nature, and, more broadly still, the nature of reality. So, when engaging in practical philosophy in this way, do they require a rigorous and systematic investigation into metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology? Or does it suffice to rely on a less precise grasp of our underlying assumptions in these areas?" (2).

The answer he defends is (a) that in the *Republic* Plato presents a shorter route to ethical truth (bypassing the metaphysics and epistemology of the central books), while insisting that a more rigorous and precise longer route, grounded in the world of Forms and especially in the Form of the Good, is needed; (b) but that, according to Aristotle, although it is possible to ground ethics and politics on metaphysical principles pertaining to soul, form, and nature, it is inappropriate to do so, because of the practical nature of ethics and politics. For Plato but not for Aristotle, the longer route—passing through metaphysics in order to arrive at ethical understanding—is best.

To reach this conclusion, Scott takes the reader through some of the most fundamental interpretive questions about the methodology of the *Republic* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is familiar territory, already explored by many scholars. It is a great merit of Scott's book that it sheds much new light on both works by bringing them into relation to each other. Although the interpretation he offers is controversial, it is supported by arguments constructed with great

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care and subtlety and expressed with admirable clarity. The reader is made aware of alternative readings defended by other scholars, but the book is not burdened by detail and is accessible to nonspecialists.

Scott holds that the main outline of the *Republic*'s defense of justice is contained in books 2 through 4. It goes as follows: the three parts of the soul of a just person are in perfect harmony. In such individuals, reason recognizes what is in their best interest, and their emotions and appetites are in complete accord with their rational decisions. They have no need to take advantage of others (what Plato calls *pleonexia*), for their well-being is constituted by each part of their soul doing its own job—not in domination over others or physical pleasure.

This somewhat indeterminate picture of the psychology of the just person becomes more determinate in books 8 and 9, where the distinction between necessary and unnecessary appetites is drawn and put to use. A noteworthy feature of this argument is that although the epistemology and other-worldly metaphysics of the *Republic* are expounded in the interval between its initial presentation (in books 3 and 4) and its elaboration (in books 8 and 9), that material plays no essential role in securing the conclusion that the just person is far happier than the unjust person. Or, to be more precise, the ontology of the Forms is invoked in only one brief argument in book 9—the one that purports to show that "lower" pleasures are not fully real (583b–88a). The three other arguments found in book 9 stand on their own: they are elaborations on the psychology of book 4 and bypass the metaphysics defended in books 5 through 7.

Scott does not mean to say that for Plato there is little to be gained from the metaphysics of the Forms for the project of understanding the value of justice. Plato makes it quite clear to his readers that there is much more to be learned about how we should live than is made explicit in the *Republic*. Because the Form of the Good is the ultimate explanation for the value of the virtues, a full understanding of why one should be just must flow from a hard-won insight into the nature of that highest Form. But what Scott insists upon is that the nature of the Good does not play a role in any of the arguments that are presented in the *Republic*.

Aristotle, as Scott reads him, differs in precisely this respect from Plato. There is, for Aristotle, nothing to be gained in *ethical* understanding (or, as Aristotle might put it, in "practical truth") by undertaking a full-scale inquiry into the nature of the soul, or the nature of being and substance. In the well-known words of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "Our discussion would be adequate if we attained a level of clarity appropriate to the underlying subject matter. Precision should not be sought in all subjects alike" (1094b11–12, Scott's translation, 124). Of course, Aristotle should not be taken to mean that one must never inquire into the nature of the soul, or the distinction between activities and states, or other topics of first philosophy. Rather, the point is that one would in that case not be enhancing one's understanding of the subject matter of the *Ethics*—which is practical, not theoretical.

In a brief concluding chapter, Scott asks what explains this difference between our two authors. Why does Plato think that as a *practical* matter we ought ideally to ground our valuation of ethical virtue in the nature of reality, whereas Aristotle views such a project as the abandonment of practical inquiry in favor of theoretical activity? Scott replies that Aristotle, unlike Plato, had "confidence in the reliability of (considered) human judgment" (214). Plato, in other words, is more moved by skeptical doubts than Aristotle. Representing Plato, he writes, "How are we to know that the assumptions we take for granted . . . are true? How can we defend ourselves from skeptical attack? Surely the only way is to attempt what Plato recommends in the *Republic*—to go back as far as we can, i.e. to bedrock principles. . . . The quest for precision is not to be characterized as an intellectually indulgent interest in the truth per se, but as something ultimately practical" (214).

Why did Aristotle not also think in these terms? Scott's answer, as I would put it, is that well-trained ethical agents already have all the warrant they need for assuming that their ethical starting points are correct. That is, they already have enough for practical purposes.

Scott does not press the issue dividing Plato and Aristotle beyond this point. But there seems to be an inherent instability in the view he attributes to Aristotle. According to Scott's Aristotle, ethical agents should have *some* degree of justification for the actions that they undertake and for the general conduct of their lives—but there is also a higher degree of justification that they do not need. The problem is this: if it is important, as a *practical* matter, not only to engage in a correct form of behavior but to understand why it is best to act that way, then why is it not worthwhile, as a *practical* matter, to grasp, as fully as one can, the metaphysical principles that the conduct of one's life rests upon—even when one has no reason to doubt that one's decisions are correct? If further reasoning could raise the level of warrant for living as one does, on what basis can one say that one already has reason enough? The idea that it is of practical value to have *some* reason, but no longer of practical value to have *full* reason, might appeal to those for whom living in accordance with reason is just one value to be weighed against many. But Aristotle cannot accept this idea. For him—as Scott would surely agree—the more fully a life accords with reason, the better a life it is.

Scott's most controversial claim about the *Republic* is that the material in the central books plays only a minor role in its defense of justice. Here is what I believe is problematic about this interpretation: (a) Plato's project is to compare the paradigm of a just person with the paradigm of an unjust person, in terms of their well-being. (2) Plato holds that complete justice requires wisdom, and that it is only philosophers in the strict sense (lovers of otherworldly Forms) who are completely just. From these two premises, it follows that Plato's project involves comparing the soul of the philosopher and the soul of a tyrant. And this simply cannot be done without the central books of the *Republic*, because that is where

Plato's portrait of the philosopher is found. So, Plato is inviting his readers to ask: who are these philosophers, and what is it about them that makes their lives so worthwhile, whether they live in the ideal city or not, and whether they are tortured on the rack or not? Surely one of the essential features of these intellectuals is that they are lovers of Forms. And once we have reached this conclusion, it is not far-fetched to take Plato to be saying that dwelling among the Forms is precisely what makes the life of a paradigmatically just person so worthwhile.

One aspect of Aristotle's methodology that receives close attention from Scott is contained in his "race course analogy." The familiar passage reads (in Scott's translation): "But we should not forget that there is a difference between arguments from starting points and arguments to them. For Plato, too, was right when he used to puzzle about this and ask whether the journey was from starting points or to them, just as on a race course one can ask whether the journey goes from the judges to the turning points or back again" (1095a30–b1).

Scott argues that "almost all of the *NE* is concerned with just one of the journeys described in the race course analogy. The path towards principles is essentially a matter of specifying the goal and its component parts, and most of the *NE* is exhausted on this project" (173). But what of the return journey, the one that takes us from principles ("the goal and its component parts") back to where we began? Scott proposes that the "downward explanatory movement implied by the race course analogy" (177) is to be found in the *Politics*. "We started with a good upbringing, inculcated by habits . . . , and we shall end up discussing them: the final item on the list of things to be done at the end of X.9 is to reflect on the habits appropriate to the best state" (177).

An alternative that I prefer is to take the "downward explanatory movement" to consist, to a large extent, in all of the deliberations of the ethical agent that proceed from a conception of *eudaimonia* as the excellent activity of reason to concrete conclusions about how to act here and now. This is perhaps what Aristotle has in mind when he says (10.9 1179a18–19) that "the truth in practical matters must be judged from deeds and from life" (*ek tôn ergôn kai tou biou*; my translation). We test a theory of happiness by its applicability to concrete circumstances.

There is much more in Scott's book than I have mentioned—illuminating discussions of the Line and the Cave, and of Aristotle's "endoxic method," for example. But it should be clear from my remarks that this is a book that scholars and students of Plato and Aristotle cannot afford to ignore.

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