Semantic Luck

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[Comments Very Welcome]

1. Introduction

The present paper has two goals. The first and more immediate one is to present an argument against one of MacFarlane's motivations for assessment-sensitivity. Its second and larger aim is to show that the current debate between contextualists and relativists in semantics is very similar to the also current debate surrounding moral luck in ethics. Such is the similarity between these two debates, so I claim, that one can just take almost any argument from this later debate, change some terms, adapt the examples, and end up with an argument relevant for the former. Actually, that is what I am going to do here. Take a well known arguments against moral luck, and turn it into an argument against relativism.

The paper is structured in two parts. In the first one, I try to show the strong similarities between the debates surrounding relativism and moral luck in semantics and ethics respectively. On the second part, I take Brian Rosebury's argument against moral luck in his (1995) «Moral Responsibility and "Moral Luck"» and turn it into a new argument against relativism.

In order to introduce semantic relativism, I will present a semantic puzzle – one of Sally's puzzle from Macfarlane (????) – that seems to be better accounted for from relativistic perspective than from a contextualist one. Then, I will introduce a common general reservation many authors have against relativism. I will then show that this concern shares some essential features with a similar concern many ethicists have had against moral luck. For this purpose, I will give a broad overview of the moral luck debate, highlighting the parallelisms it has with the relativism/contextualism debate. The purpose of this presentation would be to motivate the claim that we, as semanticists interested in the general

plausibility of assessment sensitivity, may have something to learn from the debate on moral luck. However, this later claim will not be proved, but by example.

In the second and final part of this paper, I will give an example of how semanticists can *learn from* ethicists. My case study will be Brian Rosebury's 1995 paper «Moral Responsibility and "Moral Luck"». There, Rosebury argues against Bernard Williams' interpretation of his now famous truck driver example. According to Williams, a truck driver who faultlessly run over a pedestrian exemplifies what he calls (bad) "moral luck." I will show that William's truck driver example is very similar to Sally example above. It fits both Williams' diagnosis and Rosebury's Prognosis. This means that, if Rosebury is right, i.e. we do not need moral luck to explain the truck driver behavior in William's example, we may not need assessment-sensitivity to account for cases like Sally's either.

2. Why go relativist?

Relativism in semantics is the claim that there are expressions in our natural language that are contextually dependent on features of the context of assessment, rather than on the usual context of utterance. As such, it is motivated by several puzzling semantic phenomena that do not seem to be explainable through regular contextualism alone. Consider the following scenario: Sally's mother comes into Sally's bedroom to find her looking under the bed. "What is going on?" asks Sally's mother, "why are you looking under the bed?". "My glasses, They might be under there", replies Sally. After taking a long look under the bed, Sally finds no glasses under it. So she moves on to look in other places, not before saying "Oops, I was wrong."

Simplifying the example, let us consider Sally asserting the following two sentences: (1) before, and (2) after unsuccessfully looking for her glasses under the bed:

(1) My glasses might be under the bed.

(2) Oops, I was wrong.

Both assertions seem to be justified. Both times, Sally seems to be justified in asserting what she did. There seems to be nothing wrong in Sally affirming that her glasses might be under the bed, before looking. And yet later, she seems to be also justified in asserting that she was wrong. We are inclined neither to say that

she said something false, misleading or in any other way unjustified either time. However, its seem that, in order for Sally to be justified in asserting (2), there must have been something wrong in her assertion (1), and vice versa. Therefore, a puzzle arises from our conflicting intuitions that Sally was justified in asserting both (1) and (2).

To solve the puzzle, one must determined what proposition was asserted in (1), what was retracted in (2) and whether it was the same or not. If what was asserted in (1) was later retracted in (2), one must explain how it is possible for Sally to be justified in asserting it in the context of (1) and later reject it in context (2). Otherwise, one must explain what *wrong* is Sally recognizing in (2), if not her assertion of (1).

There are just a few salient propositions that might have been asserted in (1) and/or retracted in (2). Without loss of generality, we may consider three kinds of candidate propositions:

(3). Sally's glasses were under the bed.

(4). For all Sally knew *at time* t_1 (at the time of her assertion), her glasses could have under the bed.

(5). For all Sally would come to know *at* t_2 (the time of her retraction), her glasses were under the bed.

Let us check first whether any of these candidates could have been the content of Sally's first assertion or not. According to the relativist, Sally could not have been asserting (3) in (1), because Sally could not that know whether or not her glasses were under the bed before looking. Therefore, at that time Sally could not be justified in asserting they were there. However, she was justified in asserting that they *might* have been there. According to the relativist, the particle « might » adds something to the content of the assertion, not just force. Therefore, the content of her assertion could not have been (3).

The content of Sally's assertion (1) could not have been (5) either, because at the time of her assertion, Sally knew that after looking under the bed, she would come to know whether her glasses were there or not. This means that she could not have been justified in asserting what the outcome of her search would be, before undertaking it. Therefore, (5) cannot be what Sally asserted in (1) either.

The remaining candidate (4), however, does sound promising. For all Sally knew at the time of her assertion, her glasses could well have been under the

bed. Not only is this something true, but also something Sally knew at the time of her assertion. Therefore, it is something she would have been justified in asserting at that time t_1.

Let us turn now to the question of what was retracted in (2). This time, (3) seems a promising candidate, for this is something Sally came to know to be false after looking under the bed. What she found out was that her glasses were not under the bed. The same holds for (5). It is also something she came to know at the time of uttering (2). Therefore, any of them could well be what she was retracting in (2). Proposition (4), in contrast, is still true. Even after Sally is done looking under the bed, it remains true that, for all she knew before, her glasses could have been there.

Summarizing, (4) fits better our intuitions about what was asserted, but not about what was retracted. On the other hand, (3) and (5) fit better our intuitions about what was retracted, but not about what was asserted. Therefore, it seems like, there must be further options. If what was asserted in (1) was also what was retracted in (2), it must be something that Sally was justified to assert at t_1 (just like (4) above), but also something that she was justified to retract at t_2 (like (3) and (5)). Preferably, it must be something thatwas true at t_1 (like (4)), but false at t_2 (like (3) and (5)). There cannot be such a proposition within the limits of contextualism. Therefore – relativists conclude –, we require a new kind of content that is sensitive, not only to the setting or context of assertion at t_1, but also to the context of its assessment at t_2. We require an assessment-sensitive proposition like:

(6) For all Sally knew at time *t*, her glasses were under the bed.

where *t* is a context-sensitive variable that is assigned the time the proposition is assessed.

This is precisely how MacFarlane interprets Sally's puzzle, for he writes:

After Sally learns [from looking under the bed that her glasses are not under it], she occupies a context of assessment relative to which her original claim is false (since she now knows more than she did). So it is proper for her to retract it. ...earlier epistemic modal claims are *always* evaluated in light of what we know now.

This way, we can turn Sally's puzzle into an argument for assessment-sensitivity.

1. What is asserted in t1 is true in t1 (and Sally knows it in t1).
2. What is retracted in t2 is false in t2 (and Sally knows it in t2, but not t1).
3. What is asserted in t1 is what is retracted in t2.
4. Therefore, what is asserted in t1 and retracted in t2 is true in t1 (and Sally knows this in t1) and false in t2 (and Sally knows this in t2).

3. What might be wrong with relativism?

Relativism does not lack antagonists. Current debates surrounding relativism may be classified in two large groups. On the one hand, there are those devoted to debating the very idea of assessment-sensitivity. Their aim is to answer questions like: it it self-undermining?, does it mesh well with the rest of our semantics", is it tractable, stable, etc.? what purpose is served by it?, and so on. On the other hand, there are those aimed at evaluating how well relativism accounts for the semantics phenomena that supposedly motivate it. In our case, the question would be how well the relativist proposal solves Sally's puzzle: does it solve it?, is it the only solution? and if not, is it the best?

Recently, Jeffrey King (2003) and Manolo García Carpintero (*forthcoming*), for example, have criticized John MacFarlane's assessment sensitivity account of assertion for making its normative stance intractable. According to King and García-Carpintero, by making truth relative to contexts of assessment, which are not in any strong sense dependant on the context of use (so that no information available at the context of use may determine all possible contexts or standards of assessment), [1] MacFarlane has made truth dependant on things (possibly) well beyond the asserter's information and control. Given the truth-commitment account of assertion that MacFarlane favors, this makes many (probably most) assertions commit the asserter to a truth that is intractable from the asserter's position. This means that, for relativists, assertions commonly involve what I will call "semantic luck", as semantic analogue to Williams' (1981)

[1]. So that no information available at the context of use may determine all possible contexts or standards of assessment. Contexts of assessment may not be merely the context of the hearers or whoever the assertion may be directed to, but may include any contexts from which the assertion in question may be challenged, including those that go beyond the asserter's lifetime.

and Nagel's (1979) seminal notion of "moral luck" –, according to which cases where a significant aspect of what someone asserts depends on factors beyond her control do not make any commitment to the truth of what is said indeterminate in such a way as to make such commitment intractable to the asserter.

> ...though it seems correct to hold that the things I believe, doubt, etc. can change truth value across worlds (i.e. some of the things I believe are true though they would have been false had the world been different), it is hard to make sense of the idea that the things I believe may change truth value across time and location. What would it be e.g. to believe that the sun is shining, where what I believe is something that varies in truth-value across times and locations in the actual world? It seems clear that when I believe that the sun is shining, I believe something about a particular time and location, so that what I believe precisely does not vary in truth value over times and locations. Further, powerful arguments have been given against the view that the objects of belief are things that change truth-value over time. So it appears that propositions must and must not change truth-value across time and location. Something has to give. (King 2003)

> My reasons here are, essentially, Evans' (1985, 349-50): we are not properly told what we should do, if we are told that orders should be obeyed, or promises complied with, or assertions should be true "from a given perspective", i.e., as Evans puts it, now correct, but later incorrect, "according to the state of the weather". (García-Carpintero *forthcoming*) [2]

In MacFarlane's proposal, assertions may have *unexpected* contexts of assessment (from eavesdroppers, for example, or people who may find out about the assertion in unexpected circumstances), that is, contexts of assessment which could not be predicted from the information available to the asserter *in the context of use*. Unexpected contexts of assessment may be unavailable to the asserter at the moment of assertion, but she may still find out enough information about them, say, at later times or in other circumstances. As a matter of fact, in MacFarlane's account, in order for the asserter to be able to fulfill her commitment to truth, she must be aware of the standards from which her assertion is challenged or new evidence I evaluated. Commitments to truth are triggered by challenges and evidence[3]. Challenges and evidence are, of course, also assessment-sensitive acts.

[2]. Here, García-Carpintero makes reference to Evans (1985, 349-50).

[3]. I use "evidence" here as short for showing that some proposition is true or false at a certain context of use and context of assessment.

The truth of (the content of) an assertion[4] is challenged (and the challenge is met) relative to (standards in) a context of assessment. Similarly, evidence is only so relative to (the standards in) a context of assessment. In order to meet the challenge or retract in the face of refuting evidence, the asserter has to be able to know (at least something about) the standards at the context (of assessment) from which the challenge is made or the evidence is offered. One is not committed to defending one's assertion against challenges one does not know, or from contexts one is not able to situate oneself. Similarly, one is not committed to retract from evidence that one is not faced with.[5]

This brief point sheds important light on the main difference on perspectives between contextualists like García Carpintero and relativists like MacFarlane. García Carpintero thinks that whatever normatively relevant aspects assertion may have, they have to be available to the asserter at the context of use. In other words, whether an assertion is correct or not, must be determined at the moment and in the context the assertion is made. MacFarlane, in contrast, thinks of normativity as forward-looking, that is, as being responsive to circumstances that may happen *after* the assertion is made. Whether an assertion is correct or not is not determined at the time and context of assertion, but again at (each of) the future contexts where such assertion may be challenged and/or presented with new evidence.

This kind of difference in perspectives for normativity is well known in metaethical discussions. There has been a long ethical tradition for which moral responsibility and judgment cannot be based but on elements available and assignable to the agent *at the time of the action*. However, this tradition has been strongly challenged by consequentialists and others for whom, the moral value of an action substantially depends on its consequences, even if those consequences could not be determined at the time of performance. This parallelism between the semantic and ethical cases must not be very surprising, if one notices that García-

[4]. García-Caprintero prefers to talk about "what is said", while Macfarlane sticks to talking about "the content of the assertion". I find no substantive difference and will use the later expression.

[5]. This last point is central to understand the subjective nature of matters like taste (and how they are different from other assessment-sensitive expressions like epistemic ones). For, in matters of taste, it is very difficult for challengers to make their standards of evaluation clear and explicit enough for she whom assertion is being challenged.

Carpintero and King's criticism of relativism is grounded in the assertoric analogue of the so-called *Control Principle* in Ethics:

> (**Control Principle in Ethics**) We are morally assessable only to the extent that what we are assessed for depends on factors under our control.

Now, if we just remove the word "morally" from the control principle above, and change it so that the principle is not about moral value, but about the correctness of assertions, what we get is an analogue principle for assertion:

> (**Control Principle for Assertion**) One cannot rationally take responsibility for making correct assertions, if the correctness or otherwise of one's assertions depends on what is the case at contexts about which one lacks any information, or control.

As must be well known, Williams (1981) and Nagel (1979) argued in their now classic pair of articles, that our everyday moral judgments and practices commit us to the existence of moral luck, that is, cases "where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment" (Nagel 1979, 175). So that "it is impossible to morally assess anyone for anything if we adhere to the Control Principle." (Nelkin 2004) According to relativists, on the other hand, our everyday semantic judgment and practices commit us to the existence of what I am calling "Semantic Luck", that is, cases where a significant aspect of what someone asserts depends on factors beyond her control, and yet we continue to treat her in that respect as committed to the truth of what she asserted. By a «significant part », of course, I mean aspects that may change the content of the assertion from being true to being false. This entails that one may be committed to defending the truth of (the content) of assertions one has made, even if at least some of the reasons why our assertion is taken to be false (at the time and circumstances of the challenge) was beyond our control or epistemic access at the time and circumstances of assertion. Relativism, therefore, entails the claim that it is impossible to semantically assess many kinds of assertions if we adhere to the Control Principle.

To further ground the similarities between moral and semantic luck, consider the following characterization of moral luck, by Andrew Latus (2001):

> The problem of moral luck traps us between an intuition and a fact:

1) the intuition that luck must not make moral differences (e.g., that luck must not affect a person's moral worth, that luck must not affect what a person is morally responsible for).
2) the fact that luck does seem to make moral differences (e.g., we blame the unfortunate driver more than the fortunate driver).
Responses to the problem have been of two broad sorts. Some claim that the intuition is mistaken, that there is nothing wrong with luck making a moral difference. Others claim that we have our facts wrong, that luck never does make a moral difference. The first sort of response has been the least popular.

Semantic luck can be characterized by a very similar tension. The problem of semantic luck also traps us between a similar intuition and a theory:

1) the intuition that luck must not make semantic differences e.g., that luck must not affect what a person is responsible for when she makes an assertion.
2) the theory that, if there is assessment sensitivity in our language, luck does seem to make semantic differences (e.g., we retract from unfortunate mistakes).

Just as in the case of moral luck, responses to the problem of semantic luck have been of two broad sorts. Some (Relativists) claim that the intuition is mistaken, that there is nothing wrong with luck making a semantic difference. Others (Anti-Relativists) claim that our theory (of assessment sensitivity) is wrong, i.e. that luck never makes a semantic difference.

Now, if the similarity is as robust as I claim, semanticisists debating assessment sensitivity may have something to learn from the ethical debate surrounding moral luck. In what is left of this text I will try to demonstrate, by way of example, that there are important semantic lessons to be learnt from the moral luck debate. In particular, I will borrow some arguments against moral luck and try to adapt them to work against semantic luck and, therefore, against relativism as well. These sample arguments will come from Brian Rosebury's influential 1995 article "Moral Responsibility and "Moral Luck"."

4. Luck and Responsibility

Rosebury's article is aimed against one of Williams' original examples motivating moral luck. In such example, "a truck driver accidentally kills a child; despite being innocent even of negligence, he will feel worse than any spectator, and

though people will rightly seek to move him away from this feeling, [and] it is important that this is seen as something that should need to be done and indeed some doubt would be felt about a driver who too blandly or readily moved to that position." So described, Williams finds this to be a clear case of moral luck. On his interpretation, (i) the truck driver is innocent, but (ii) unfortunate. He is innocent, because the fatal accident cannot be traced back to any negligence on his part. Furthermore, (iii) he is justified in feeling bad because (iv) he actually did something awful: He killed a child. For Williams, this is a clear case of moral luck, because the truck driver is both an agent of evil, and completely innocent.

In his article, Roseburry challenges Williams' interpretation of the truck driver case. He questions both the truck driver's innocence, and the reason he feels bad. He does not try to demonstrate that Williams interpretation is wrong, but only to weaken the intuition behind it, showing that other interpretations are equally plausible. Thus, he offers three other equally plausible interpretations where there is no moral luck at play, i.e. where the truck driver is either not innocent or has done nothing reprehensible.

(a) First, Rosebury has us notice that we may interpret the case on such a way that the truck driver is not innocent, but negligent. We may agree that, given what was at stake (a child's life), he should have been more careful. If the truck driver had noticed that a child's life was at stake, he would have been more careful. Care and negligence are relative notions for Rosebury. One may be negligent or careful regarding a task depending on how much is at stake. Higher stakes demand higher standards of care. In this case, the truck driver may have just now realized that the stakes were higher than he had thought. That may be why he feels bad. In cases like these, where the wrongdoer is guilty of underestimating the risk involved, Rosebury argues, the proper moral response is sympathy. In this case, even though (4) is true, i.e. the truck driver feels bad for doing something awful, there is no moral luck because (1) is false, i.e. the truck driver is not actually innocent of negligence, but guilty.

(b) However, notices Rosebury, we could also interpret the example the other way around. It might have been the case that, even considering a child's life was at stake, the truck driver was appropriately careful – i.e. not negligent – yet unlucky enough to still kill the child. That is not enough to consider this a case of moral luck yet, because what he has done may not be judged as morally wrong.

But, if he did not do anything wrong, there must be other reason why he feels bad. Rosebury has us consider the possibility that the truck driver "Feels awful, because he has been the instrument of another's death… For who could possibly bear being part of an accident that ends with a killed child? » Once again, the proper response for situations of this kind is sympathy.

(c) Finally, Rosebury shows that (3) may be false too. Thus, the truck driver may not be *justified* in feeling bad after all. This could be the case if he is unduly «blaming himself» for something he is not responsible for. In this case, in contrast to the previous two, our proper response would not be to show sympathy. Instead, we must « dissuade him from doing so by pointing to the absence of agency on his part". Saying something along the lines of "don't feel bad, it was not your fault" may be adequate here.

According to Rosebury, any of these alternative interpretations may be appropriate for the situation. We may not know which one is the right one because Williams' example is underspecified. Williams is especially vague when he talks about the truck driver *feeling bad*, for there are certainly many ways of feeling bad. So, we do not know, for example, if the truck driver is feeling *grief, sorrow, horror* or *reproach*.[6] All of them are ways of feeling bad, yet only the last one is a « moral sentiment », that is, only the last one is (necessarily) associated with a certain moral judgment. One can easily be horrified of things one does not consider wrong or bad, for example. Grief comes from loss, not from evil, and sorrow is broad enough to cover both moral and no-moral distress. This means that there are many kinds of bad feelings the truck driver may be experiencing independently of (his own appraisal of) the moral status of his or any other's actions.

Finally, even if the truck driver's feeling was moral – i.e. reproach –, it is unclear what he is *feeling bad about*. He may be feeling reproach about something he has done. But he may as well be feeling reproach for something someone else did. Maybe, from the truck driver's perspective, it was the child or someone else's actions that may actually be responsible for the child's death.

[6]. I am using "reproach" to make reference to the complex set of moral emotions and feeling, including *regret* and *guilt* as well the moral forms of *embarrassment* and *shame*.

5. The Semantic Turn

This was a very fast but accurate enough portrayal of Rosebury's main point on (1995). Now it is time to see how well it transfers from the ethical to the semantic arena. Thus, it is necessary to determine just how much MacFarlane's interpretation of Sally's case is similar to William's interpretation of his own truck driver example. My contention will be that the truck driver is as justified in apologizing and feeling bad about what happened, despite not having done anything **bad**, as Sally is justified in apologizing and feeling bad about what happened, despite not having said anything **false**.

In order to see how similar these two cases are, notice that Sally's situation fits Williams' diagnosis of the truck driver's situation perfectly. According to Williams, the truck driver was innocent, yet justified in feeling bad for the accident he was involved in. In Sally's case, according to MacFarlane, she was also innocent, yet justified in retracting. In the case of the truck driver, his bad feeling was significantly stronger that any bad feeling any innocent bystander may justifiably feel. Similarly, Sally's retraction cannot me mistaken for any sympathetic utterance of "I'm sorry" any innocent bystander may make. Furthermore, just like other people may rightly seek to move the truck driver from his woeful reaction to the accident, people may also rightly seek to move Sally away from her retraction. Finally, in both cases, Sally and the truck driver's reaction is seen as something that not only was justified, but morally mandatory or even virtuous.

Sally's case fits William's diagnosis so well, that it would certainly be surprising if it did not fit Roseburry's prognosis as well. It would be surprising if Rosebury criticisms against William's interpretation would not work against MacFarlane's interpretation too. Thus, if we adapt them to the semantic case, we may have a way to weaken MacFarlane's reading of Sally's retraction as a case of genuine assessment sensitivity. That is what I will try to do in the remaining of the paper.

Remember that, according to Williams, the truck driver's accident exemplified a genuine case of moral luck because it satisfied four clear conditions: (i) the truck driver was innocent, (ii) unlucky, and (iii) justifiably feeling bad after the fact because (iv) he did something awful. Thus, he both did nothing bad (so he is innocent), and something awful (so he is unlucky). In other words, the

truck driver had the bad (moral) luck to do something awful, without doing anything (morally) wrong. In a very similar fashion, Sally's case is assessment-sensitive, because it satisfies 4 similar conditions: (i) Sally is innocent (of asserting that the glasses might be under the bed), (ii) unlucky (that the glasses were not there), and is justified in (iii) her *post-facto* retraction because (iv) she actually said something false. Now, Rosebury has given us a way to reinterpret the truck driver example so that conditions (i) to (iv) do not hold. In particular, he has shown us ways to interpret the truck driver case so that either

(a) the truck driver did something wrong, so he is not innocent after all or

(b) he is innocent, so he did nothing wrong and is justified in feeling bad for some other reason, or, finally,

(c) he is innocent, but not justified in feeling bad afterwards.

In none of these three plausible interpretations, the truck driver innocently did something awful and, therefore, there is no moral luck. The purpose of the rest of this article is to give similar new interpretations (a) to (c) for Sally's case, where assessment sensitivity does not occur because one of the four conditions (i) to (iv) is not satisfied.

(a) Sally is not innocent

Let us start with case (a), where Sally could have actually been negligent after all. Drawing on the analogy with the truck driver case, several possibilities arise. For example, Rosebury suggests that the difference between being negligent or careful depends on what the stakes are in a given context. So, when we think that the truck driver is not negligent, we may be using the wrong standard of safety. Once we realize, because of the accident, that a child's life was a stake, we raise those standards and realize that, according to those higher standards, the truck driver was actually negligent.

Something similar may be said about our appreciation of Sally's justification for assertion. We may say that the content of Sally's assertion (1) is actually (3), but that the use of "might" makes its assertion sensitive to a contextually determined epistemic standard. Whetherwe are justified in asserting that something *might* be the case or not depends on those standards. In our example, Sally could have been right, under a certain *low* epistemic standard, in asserting that her glasses might be under the bed (since she did not know that

they were not there). But she might have also been wrong under a *higher* epistemic standard (since she did not know that he glasses were there). Whether or not she was actually justified depends on what was the relevant standard.

This allows for two different interpretations. On the one hand, we may stick to the idea that Sally was justified in both asserting (1) and later retracting from it. This can be explained by the fact that the epistemic standards changed between t_1 and t_2. At t_1, the standards were low enough for her to be justified in asserting (1), but at t_2 they had risen enough to make the assertion unjustified. Whether or not this can be considered a case of semantic luck, depends on the reasons the standard changed. If they changed because of something beyond Sally's information and control, she was unlucky indeed. Otherwise, she was negligent. Either case, relativism is kept at bay, because no assessment-sensitive proposition has to be postulated. The content of Sally's assertion and retraction is your everyday proposition (3). Relativism is transferred to the assertability conditions of "might" sentences.

Rosebury does not consider this possibility because, for him, epistemic standards are dependant on whatever is at stake. What is at stake does not change between t_1 and t_2. Consider the truck driver's situation. After the accident, the stakes for driving did not rise. They stayed the same. What changed was our appreciation of those stakes. We may usually think that the standards of safety for driving are very low, because not much is at stake. However, it takes an accident to realize just how much is actually at stake every time we drive. Accidents do not raise stakes, they show how high they have always been.

In Sallys' case, we may also want to keep the epistemic standard fixed and argue that what changed between t_1 and t_2 was our appreciation of such standards. According to this interpretation, after looking under the bed, Sally did not only realize that her glasses were not under there, but also that the epistemic standards relevant for (1) were higher than she originally thought. In other words, she realized that she had not been justified in asserting (1) and, instead, must have been more careful. If this is the case, in uttering "I am sorry", Sally might have retracted, not from saying something false, but from having used too low an epistemic standard (just like the truck driver had felt bad for driving with too low a standard of safety).

That we may be tempted to think of this as a case of semantic luck may be explained by the fact that our appreciation of the epistemic standards also changed between t_1 and t_2. At t_1, we thought the standards were low enough for her to be justified in asserting (1), but at t_2 they had raised enough to make the assertion unjustified. That is why we first thought she was justified and then realized she was not. Just like Sally, we were wrong at t_1, but did not notice until t_2.

Finally, we may also want to defend the possibility that the content of Sally's assertion (1) was (4) above. That way, we respect the original intuition that Sally was justified in asserting (1) at t_1 because what she asserted was true. For all she knew before looking under the bed, her glasses could have been there. However, we may argue, she was still justified in retracting later, not because what she asserted had somehow *become false*, but because she was wrong in some other way. This sort of interpretation requires a strong asymmetry between truth in assertion and falsity in retraction: Truth may be required for being justified in making an assertion, and still falsity may *not* be required for being justified in retracting such assertion.

Anti-relativists like Price and Barker have pursued a similar line of argument. According to Barker, even though Sally was justified in apologizing for being *wrong* in what she said, she could not be equally justified in asserting that what she had said was *false*. Consider the following four possible sentences Sally could have uttered after looking under the bed:

(2) Oops, I was wrong!

(2') Oops, I am sorry!

(2") Oops, they were not there!

(2"') Oops, it was false!

Notice that (2), (2') and (2") seem fine, but not (2"'). According to Baker, this is further evidence that the content of Sally's assertion was not (3), and that falsehood is in no way involved in Sally's retraction. Thus, he concludes, being wrong or being sorry about asserting some proposition p might be the case must involve something else besides a commitment to the truth of p from some epistemic standard or other.

Thus we have a variety of options for interpreting Sally's situation so that she is no longer innocent, no semantic luck is involved and, finally, no assessment-sensitive propositions are required.

(b) Sally did nothing wrong

So, we can move on to case (b), where Sally is justified in saying "I was wrong", but not because what she asserted was false, or because she recognizes any fault in her assertion, but for some other reason that implies no wrongdoing on her part. For example, she may retract from asserting something because of some unintended negative consequence her assertion might have. The asserter may or not be responsible for these consequences. Yet, even if she is innocent, she may still feel (and justifiably assert being) sorry about the consequences of her assertion in solidarity with those who bear their negative burden.

To further ground this later possibility, suppose Sally was not searching alone for her glasses under the bed, but leading a search group, looking for a fugitive, into a dangerous combat zone. In this context, her apologetic stance seems even more natural. She did not only thought that the fugitive was in that zone, but she also *acted on it*. She took the search group into the danger zone because she thought the fugitive *might* be there. She took a risk and, in the end, it did not pay off. The fugitive, like the glasses, just wasn't there. Her conjecture had a price and it was paid not only by her, but by everyone who risked it into the combat zone. It is in solidarity with those who followed her that she apologizes. "Oops, I was wrong."

Following Rosebury, we can notice that saying "Oops, I was wrong" is very uninformative, for it may express a wide variety of feelings, many of which may not entail the recognition of fault. Just like the truck driver could have felt awful for his involvement in the child's death, without assigning himself any blame, so could Sally felt bad about, say, wasting her time looking fruitlessly under the bed, without recognizing any fault of her own. If one is justified in feeling sorry for the unfortunate consequences of one's actions, without recognizing that the originating actions were bad or wrong, we have an alternate explanation for Sally's retraction (and the truck driver pain) that does not involve

moral or semantic luck.[7] In fact, we are frequently justified in apologizing for things we are innocent of. It is not rare to apologize for so-called "innocent mistakes". In doing so, we are apologizing without recognizing any wrongdoing. Sally's mistake, therefore, could also be innocent and her retraction could, therefore, also entail no recognition of any wrongdoing on her part.

In general, one commonly feels bad about getting it wrong, even when one could not do better, and this is what Sally might be expressing in (2). So, when Sally says "I was wrong", she may not be asserting that she was wrong in asserting (1), but only reiterating that her search was fruitless. Maybe Sally is recognizing that she was wrong in looking under the bed. Not because she did not have good reasons to look there (after all, for all she knew, her glasses could have been there), but because she did not find them there. After all, it is common to say that a search was wrong, not because it was unjustified, but because it was fruitless. Searching is a goal-oriented activity. As such, it aims at finding. The aim of Sally's search under her bed was to find her glasses. Since they were not there, her search was fruitless and as such, *wrong* in some sense.

As a matter off act, there are at least three ways in which a search may be faulty or wrong. First, it may be unjustified. We may not have good enough reasons to look for something somewhere. Thus, to look for something in a place where we have no good reason to think it might be is faulty in this first way. In a second way, a search may be so badly performed that, in the end, we may still be at loss as to whether the object we were looking for was there or not. Finally, a search may be fruitless, i.e. the object may not be found where we look. This third kind of search may not be as bad as the previous two. We may have good reasons to search in that particular place for that particular object, we may perform it with such diligence that in the end we may certainly know whether the object is there or not, and yet the search may not reach its ideal goal of finding the object. In any of the three cases, one may justifiably say that something was wrong with the search. However, the relativist only takes the first possibility into account. It is only the first one that motivates the relativist puzzle and calls for

[7] Pursuing this line of thought a little bit farther, we may get a different interpretation of Sally's regret. What Sally may be sorry for is not her utterance of (1), but for any other unfortunate consequence of her uttering or believing (1). She may be sorry for having wasted her time looking for her glasses under the bed.

semantic luck. For the other two, the puzzle is a no-starter. What went wrong with her search had nothing to do with it being justified or not, so it had nothing to do with the truth of (1). This way, we have a plausible scenario where Sally is innocent (she was justified in asserting what she did), yet there is no need to postulate any assessment sensitive proposition, because her assertion remains true even after (2).

(c) Sally is blaming herself

Finally, we should consider scenario (c), where Sally's retraction is unjustified. In the original description of the puzzle, it seemed like Sally was justified in saying "I was wrong." But this may also be mistaken. Depending on how Sally delivers her retraction, we may think that Sally is «blaming herself», that is, taking the blame for the falsity of something she did not assert. In other words, she may be wrong in saying she was wrong. Just like the truck driver may 'overdo' his woe, Sally may be overdoing her reaction. And just like in the case of the truck driver, if Sally showed penitence in her retraction (instead of light sorrow or grief), it would be appropriate for us to conclude that she was overreacting. Thus we would conclude that Sally was blaming herself for something she was not responsible for, and we would try to dissuade her of doing so by pointing to her innocence. Responses like "It is ok. It was not your fault", "You could not have known", "For all you knew, they might have been there", etc. they all seem completely in order.[8]

If Sally's utterance of (2) is not justified, the puzzle dissolves. It is no longer necessary to explain how her assertion (1) became unjustified, nor what else she could Sally be wrong about. This leaves no ground for the postulation of an assessment-sensitive proposition to account for her linguistic behavior. The

[8]. Of course, the relativist may try accommodating these responses. For example, she could point out that, even if it is appropriate to respond "For all you knew, they might have been there", it is not grammatical to say "Your are right: They might have been there, but weren't." However, the relativist's intuitions at this point are already weaker, for "might have been but weren't" constructions are common in the English language. Consider, for example, the sentence "Under the bed was one of the places where the glasses might have been, but weren't." It seems perfect normal English. (On the other hand, the phrase "might be, but isn't" definitely sounds off.)

content of her original utterance (1) could well be (4). Thus, semantic luck and relativism are both avoided.

In the end, all of Roseburry's three options remain open for whoever wants to challenge the existence of semantic luck and the need for assessment sensitivity. Burrowing from his interpretations of Williams' example, I have developed several alternative interpretations of Sallys' puzzle, none of which require the postulation of assessment-sensitive propositions. I pretend neither to have shown that any one of them is the *right* interpretation, nor that they are preferable to relativism. To do so would require broader considerations and detailed comparisons. All I wanted was to raise a challenge to the relativist interpretation of a particular semantic phenomenon. This challenge is not based on any general reservation one might have against assessment-sensitivity. It is based on the existence of alternative explanations of the same phenomena. As such, it weakens one motivation behind relativism, at least for some expressions. Thus, it may still be the case that assessment-sensitivity is a genuine feature of other natural language expressions.

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