

Relativism about Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts about the Very Idea

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πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος,
τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὥς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων
ὥς οὐκ ἔστιν¹

(Protagoras DK80b1)

The setting of relativistic ideas about truth in the general style of semantic-theoretic apparatus pioneered by Lewis, Kaplan and others has persuaded many that they should at least be taken seriously as competition in the space of explanatory linguistic theory, a type of view which properly formulated, may offer an at least coherent—and indeed, in the view of some, a superior—account of certain salient linguistic data manifest in, for example, discourse about epistemic modals, about knowledge and about matters of taste and value, and may also offer the prospect of a coherent regimentation of the Aristotelian “Open Future” (along with, perhaps, the Dummettian ‘anti-real’ past.) My main purpose here to enter a reminder of certain underlying philosophical issues about relativism—about its metaphysical coherence, its metasemantic obligations, and the apparent limitations of the kind of local linguistic evidence which contemporary proponents have adduced in its favour—of which there is a risk that its apparent rehabilitation in rigorous semantic dress may encourage neglect.

7.1 RELATIVISM INTUITIVELY UNDERSTOOD

Relativism, as a view about some discourse or subject matter, is one of the oldest of philosophical stances. Many, not merely in the academy but more widely,

¹ “Of all things the measure is man: on the one hand of things that are, that they are; on the other of things that are not, that they are not.”

would be willing to describe themselves as “relativists” about certain selected subject matters: about matters of taste or, more generally, about the substance of what I have elsewhere called “disputes of inclination”.² Post-Einsteinian physics has made a received view of relativism about motion and simultaneity. Is there a common idea between, say, ethical relativism and motion relativism? A widely acknowledged manifestation of an intuitive relativistic tendency is a willingness to take seriously the idea of faultless disagreement—disagreement about a shared content where not merely need there be no flaw of evidence or procedure on the part of the disputants but where, as it is supposed, *nobody need be wrong*.³ I do believe that this is an ineliminable aspect of anything plausibly purporting to be relativism in the Protagorean tradition. However it is, I think, more illuminating to place initial emphasis on a different and, I suggest, more basic indicator of ‘folk-relativism’, and then work upwards, so to speak, to try to make space for faultless disagreement.

The more basic indicator of folk-relativism is its characteristic expression in ordinary discourse in cognates of the idiom: “There is no such thing as simply being Φ ”. After Einstein, there is, for example, no such thing as simply *being in motion*: things move, or not, in relation to each other (or, more sophisticated, in relation to a frame of reference). More intuitively, there is no such thing as an object’s simply *looking red*: something looks red, or not, in particular viewing circumstances. Indeed there is presumably no such thing as simply *being useless*: something is useless or not in relation to a particular purpose. More controversially, there is no such thing as simply *being beautiful*: things are beautiful or not in (relation to) ‘the eye of a beholder’. There is no such thing as its simply *being four o’clock*—it is four o’clock or not in relation to a time zone (that is, a set of places). Note that it doesn’t go with the “no such thing as simply being Φ ” rubric that in all cases there is no content to the idea of something’s being *absolutely* Φ —say absolutely useless. But the sense of “absolutely” involved will involve quantification through the latter place of the relation (useless for *every* purpose), not a genuine drop in degree (useless *simpliciter*.)

I suggest we think of the “no such thing as simply being Φ ” idiom as gesturing at a kind of proto- or ground-level relativism. The underlying idea is that the circumstances that confer truth or falsity on a predication of Φ tacitly involve a *further parameter* of some kind—a parameter that goes unreflected in the surface syntactic structure of the relevant predication. In such cases, what makes a predication of Φ on x correct or not is actually x ’s standing in a certain relation to certain relevant items that is more complex than the surface expression reveals. The ground-level relativistic idea is that the satisfaction-conditions of a

² See Wright (2001).

³ That is, where neither of two irreproachably generated but (apparently) mutually inconsistent opinions need involve error. As is familiar, this idea is not easy to stabilize. For a developed discussion of the issues, see my (2006).

certain property or family of properties, though superficially presenting as unary, are actually implicitly relational—or more generally, are of a *higher degree* of relationality than is apparent in the surface syntax of the predications and other characteristic forms of locution in the relevant discourse. Proto-relativism is thus a thesis about *tacit additional relationality*.

Such a thesis is often advanced in a critical spirit, or as a reminder: ordinary thinking is alleged to make a mistake about, or to be unaware of, or to be aware of but fail to pay due heed to, the real degree of a certain characteristic (or family of characteristics; say, the values). One issue for such a critic, naturally, is where exactly to locate the putative error or oversight in ordinary thought. Is it that the discourse in question calls, by virtue of its *literal sense*, for a characteristic of a certain degree when all that is available is something more complex—so that, strictly, there is sweeping untruth across the discourse? Or is it that, when speaking literally, we do succeed in referring to the more complex properties, but misunderstand their nature (and hence the sense of our discourse)? I'll return to this briefly below.

In sum: one root relativist idea as applied to a given region of discourse is that its distinctive vocabulary is somehow associated with characteristics of higher degree than manifest on the syntactic surface. But this is just the start. How do we move from here to something more recognizably Protagorean? There are no less than, arguably, five further moves to make.

As remarked, a tacit relationality thesis need not be to the effect that a certain apparently unary property is in fact binary. It may be to the effect that a certain apparently n -ary relational property is in fact $n + k$ -ary, $k > 0$. We need a distinction here. To fix ideas, let's consider whether the kind of *subject-sensitive* or *interest-relative invariantism* about knowledge proposed by writers such as Hawthorne and Stanley should be counted as a form of relativism, intuitively understood.⁴ Everyone accepts that knowledge consists in some kind of relation involving a thinker and a true proposition. What Hawthorne and Stanley are naturally viewed as proposing is that the relation in question is more complex than traditionally supposed: that it involves an additional kind of parameter—one of needs, purposes, interests, or saliences—variation in whose values between two same-world subjects can make the difference between one being knowledgeable that P while the other is not, even though their evidential achievements are otherwise exactly the same. It may seem not unnatural to propose a relativistic caption for this kind of view—that “knowledge is relative to need”, or to saliences, or whatever. Still, I expect that the theorists in question would scorn the description of their proposal as “relativist”, and for good reason. For while X 's knowing that P , on such a view, is indeed constituted in a complex relationship involving X and the proposition that P , in which X 's needs, or interests, or whatever, are an additional, traditionally unrecognized relatum, that point is not enough to motivate

⁴ John Hawthorne (2004), Jason Stanley (2005).

a relevant instance of the “no such thing as simply being Φ ” rubric. There is no sufficient motive yet for the claim that there is no such thing as (X’s) simply knowing that P. There is, in fact, no difficulty at all, for subject-sensitive invariantism, in the idea of X’s simply knowing that P. True: what *determines* whether or not X knows that P may involve additional relational complexity, at least in comparison with traditional accounts. But the upshot—prescinding from other possible sources of indeterminacy—is still that X does, or doesn’t, know that P, *tout court*.

So: what is it about the original examples that we gesture at by the “no such thing as simply being Φ ” locution, and which goes missing in knowledge as conceived by subject-sensitive invariantism? The difference is this. The truth-conditions of judgements of the form, X knows that P, proposed by Hawthorne and Stanley do indeed involve an additional parameter, unreflected in the surface syntax of the judgement. But settlement of the semantic values of certain of the (surface) syntactic constituents of such a judgement is *itself sufficient* to settle the value(s) of the relevant additional parameter(s). Merely settle, that is, who X is, and what point in his/her history is being spoken about, and you presumably have enough to determine a specific fact about what his/her relevant needs and purposes, etc., are. In the “no such thing as simply being Φ ” cases, by contrast, this—the settlement of the semantic values of other syntactic constituents of the judgement—is, precisely, not enough. In these cases, determination of the value of the extra parameter requires a contribution from factors lying outside anything settled by the semantics of the judgement concerned. There is no semantic constituent of “The Sun is moving” which denotes a frame of reference, nor are the semantic values of the constituents of that sentence, on a particular occasion of use, themselves collectively sufficient to determine a frame of reference (though other aspects of the context of use may be). Likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for an utterance of “This screwdriver is useless”. There are no semantic constituents of that sentence such that, once their semantic values—for a particular context of utterance—are determined, that must suffice to determine the relevant value of a purposes-parameter, relative to which the instrument’s uselessness is claimed.⁵

The salient next question is: what *does* determine the value of such alleged, additional parameters in relativistic cases? Of course we are hampered by the lack of uncontroversial relativistic cases—that is, examples where the operation of

⁵ Here is an opportune place to begin to emphasize the contrast between relativity of truth-value of the kind encompassed by the proposals so far made and contextuality (including indexicality) of *content*. Contextuality of content has to do with the mechanisms whereby the semantic values of the constituents of a token sentence are determined. The semantic value of a context-sensitive expression is determined as a function of its semantic character and, precisely, a context (normally, the context of an embedding sentence’s use.) Relativity of truth-value, of the kind we are concerned with, also has to do with the presence of a parameter that needs to receive a specific value before any truth-evaluable claim can be entered by a use of the sentence. But the difference is that the determination of the value of this parameter is precisely independent of that of the semantic values of the constituents of the sentence, whether or not *they* are determined as a function of context (of use).

such a parameter, and the values it takes, can be uncontroversially agreed to be independent of the semantics of the form of sentence concerned. But there is no shortage of examples where such a view has been seriously proposed, or might at least be. And in many of these, the answer is, broadly: the intentions of the speaker. Suppose, for example, we are relativists about motion. Asked whether an overtaking car was travelling quickly, we may properly answer affirmatively even though its speed exceeded that of the car in which we are travelling by no more than five miles per hour—the ‘frame of reference’ is supplied by the conversational intention rather than the physical circumstances of the conversants. A little reflection, however, discloses that, at least in the kind of case most often connected with intuitively relativist ideas, it is not the situation of a speaker, qua speaker, that matters. What matters is the situation of a *judge*. Often speaker and judge are one. But when they are not, it is often in the situation, broadly construed, of the judge that the factors determining the additional parameter are to be found. Not always. If I report John as having asserted that it was raining, and you ask me if he was right, it would be expectable that your question is asking after the probity of John’s assertion relative to the place of *his asserting* it.⁶ But if I report him as having asserted that stewed tripe is delicious, and you ask me if he is right, it is natural to hear you as asking after a judgement of the matter by *my standards*; so here the determination of the relevant parameter goes with the judge, not the assertor. This is the point that underlies the organization of the modern debates around a conception of truth as relative to *a context of assessment*.⁷

To take stock. So far, we have diagnosed an intuitive relativism about the characteristic claims of a given discourse as involving three components: first, that the truth or falsity of such claims is constituted in states of affairs whose fully explicit characterization involves an additional degree of relationality as compared with what their surface syntactic structure would suggest. Second, the determination of the value of the extra parameters involved in this additional relationality is not a function of the determination of the semantic values of the syntactic constituents in (a tokening of) the claim. Third, what does determine their value belongs with the properties of an assessor of the claim. The result is that whether such a claim is true will depend not just on its content, and the state of the world in other respects, but on who judges it and *their* state at the point of judgement.

This is still not Protagoreanism, however. For all the conditions so far imposed, it can happen that, for claims of a particular kind, the factors determining

⁶ I am not suggesting that we are intuitively inclined to a kind of Protagoreanism about the weather. (In fact, we’ll look at the example in more detail later.) Remember that at this stage we are merely working with the “no such thing as its simply being Φ ” rubric. “It is snowing” and its kin at least comply with this rubric: there is indeed no such thing as it’s simply snowing—it depends on *what place* is considered.

⁷ My impression is that this turn is more or less wholly owing to the influence of John MacFarlane’s writings.

the values of the additional parameters are such as to settle the *same* values for all participants in any particular conversation (in however broad a sense of ‘conversation’). Should that be so, there will be no possibility of intra-conversational fault-free disagreement—or at least, none occasioned purely by the relevant form of relativity. In order to provide for faultless disagreement (if indeed it is possible to make coherent provision for it), whatever settles the values taken by the extra parameters must allow them to take on distinct values for distinct assessors of a single claim—thereby generating the possibility of disagreement occasioned just by differences in the values taken. And if, in addition, disagreement is to be possibly *faultless*, the distinct values assumed for different thinkers must likewise be determined in a manner that provides no grip for the idea of fault—that is, in a fashion that does not involve bringing the assessors into liability of reproach nor underwrite any disadvantageous comparisons between the values taken (as when, for example, although X and Y are both right by their respective standards, X’s standards are properly adjudged superior to Y’s).

We thus arrive at the following proposal about what an intuitive full-blown, Protagorean relativism about a property Φ —goodness, beauty, justice, obscenity—may, as it were incrementally, consist in. (We restrict attention, for simplicity’s sake, to the range of atomic predications schematized by ‘ Φa ’.)

- (i) The circumstances conferring truth or falsity on any single token of ‘ Φa ’ involve an additional parameter, V, unreflected in the overt syntactic structure of the sentence.
- (ii) The value taken by V is not settled by determining the semantic values (in the context of use) of the syntactic constituents of the sentence.

These first two clauses secure a basis for the “no such thing as simply being Φ ” idiom.

- (iii) The value taken by V is determined instead by characteristics of one who assesses the token of ‘ Φa ’, at the point of assessment.
- (iv) These characteristics may vary between distinct assessors, for whom accordingly, as a result of different values taken by V, differing assessments may be appropriate of the token in question.

These two clauses secure a minimal Φ -relativism, involving the possibility of correct but conflicting judgements about its application in different contexts of assessment. However they do not ensure the possibility of faultless disagreement, for which we require in addition:

- (v) The variation in values taken by V may afflict participants in a single conversation.
- (vi) There is, or need be, no sense in the idea of the superiority of the assessments constrained by one value of V over those of any other.

7.2 TRUTH-RELATIVISM

So much for relativism about Φ . Our topic, though, is relativism about *truth*. We can, of course, apply the successive steps in the foregoing more or less mechanically to the idea of truth itself. The resulting truth-relativism will hold, in the first instance, that ‘*is true*’ (i) ascribes to a statement *S* a property of tacit relationality, involving (ii) an additional parameter whose values are independent of—i.e. left unsettled by determining—the semantic values of the constituents of *S*. Since—apart from those (deflationists) who do not reckon it to be a property at all—anyone will view being (contingently) true as implicating at least a binary relationship of some kind—viz. being *made true* by relevant circumstances—something worth describing as truth-relativism ought to involve the view that truth is at least *ternary*, with the values of the additional parameter fixed (iii) by certain of the characteristics of an assessor of *S*’s truth. We can then escalate up through clauses (iv) to (vi), arriving eventually at the view that *S*’s truth-value may vary with certain properties of its assessors—properties that in turn may vary irreproachably among the protagonists in a single conversation.

That may seem more or less like the kind of thing one would want truth-relativism to be. However two issues require immediate note. First, there is the question, what exactly is truth being proposed to be ternary property *of*? What is the schematic range of ‘*S*’? The claim of tacit additional relationality is nothing terribly startling if restricted to truth-bearers whose *content* is variable (e.g. type-sentences). It is the merest platitude that truth is relative to (varies with) content. Truth-relativism becomes potentially interesting only when the truth-value bearers are conceived as *beliefs*, or as *thoughts* (one use of “proposition”, which I shall stick by here), or—as more commonly in the contemporary literature—as *utterances*, but where the historical context of the utterance (by whom, when and where it is made, and in what collateral circumstances), and the semantics of the language, are fixed; in short, when everything is fixed which is normally conceived as sufficient to fix an utterance’s content.

This reflection—that any interesting truth-relativism operates *after* content is fixed—signals one major strategic line of resistance to it: that of (what I propose we here and now decide standardly to call) *Contextualism*.⁸ Contextualism, where philosophically contentious, is the thesis of some (interesting and unobvious) form of relativity of *content*. Whenever there is a case for truth-relativism—whatever form such a case may assume—there has to be theoretical space in principle for a corresponding and opposed contextualism: a

⁸ The terminology in the literature is already getting horribly tangled, and matters have not been helped by the choice of “non-indexical contextualism” by John MacFarlane to denote a type of view that is actually a variety of truth-relativism. (I’ll say a little bit more about this later.)

thesis to the effect that the additional parameter to which the truth-relativist contends that truth is relative, is actually something variation in which leads to variation in *truth-conditional content*, with the resulting variable propositions then taking their truth-values in some unremarkable, non-relativistic manner. Thus it may be suggested, for example, that it is not that the truth of the proposition that stewed rhubarb is delicious varies as a function of the standards of taste of different linguistically competent English consumers, but rather that the *propositions* they respectively express by tokens of the sentence, “Stewed rhubarb is delicious”, may so vary, and that these propositions may then take different truth-values in a straightforward, non-relativistic manner. Strategically, it is expectable that what may look like evidence for relativity of truth-value may always be *explained away* by a content-relativity thesis.⁹

It might be thought that this might be challenged as follows. Have we not in effect excluded any such diagnosis by requiring that S’s apparent relativity in truth-value should manifest as a function of variation of features of assessors, or more generally of *assessment-context*? For by contrast the features that characteristically determine the content of an indexical, or otherwise context-sensitive judgement are standardly part of the *context of its making* (the context of its utterance, if it is made out loud, or of its inscription if made on paper), rather than a context of assessment. Surely, then, there will not in general be an option of explaining the kind of relativity in truth-value characterized by our clauses as turning on context-driven shifts in content.

Not so. The correct point is rather that the form of contextualism that always potentially stands opposed to truth-relativism is a *non-standard* contextualism. Any data that suggest that judgements of a certain kind do admit of variations in truth-value in the manner characterized by the clauses we listed will allow in principle of a contextualist, rather than truth-relativist explanation provided the contextualism in question is one that allows that the *content* of a single token statement need not be something unique but may vary as a function of the properties of an assessor—in other words, that what someone literally says is not determined just by standing semantic properties of the type-sentence and the circumstances of the saying but has its own relativity to parameters whose values may vary among assessment-contexts. Far from being unheard of, such a view belongs with a long ‘hermeneutic’ tradition in philosophical semantics.¹⁰ An important point for our present purposes is therefore that truth-relativism is heavily invested in a conception of content that requires this tradition to be misguided, for the two kinds of view promise to be co-predictive in crucial cases otherwise. I’ll say more about this below (Section 5).

⁹ This reinforces Williamson’s (2005) slogan that “Contextualism is relativism tamed” (though the point is not quite what Williamson had in mind).

¹⁰ Most recently represented by the “interpretationism” of Davidson.

The second salient matter is that if the general account proposed of relativism about an arbitrary property, Φ , is accepted, at least in outline, then it is, in a way, confused to seek an account of what specifically relativism about *truth* might consist in—since there is no specific such thing. For, providing that the so-called Equivalence Schema:

It is true that S if and only if S

is not called into question, the import of truth-relativism for a range of admissible substituends for 'S' is always going to reduce to relativism about their proper subject matter, whatever it is. In the presence of the Equivalence Schema, relativism about truth for ascriptions of beauty is just relativism about beauty. And in general, relativism about truth for ascriptions of the property Φ is just relativism about Φ .

Although this is apt to impress as a point of some significance, I doubt that it is so. Certainly it would be a mistake to conclude that there is nothing for relativism about truth to be, or anything of that sort. The right conclusion is only that relativism about truth is always relativism about something else. You can be a relativist about beauty and about no other subject matter. But you cannot be a relativist about truth and about no other subject matter. Still if you are a relativist about beauty, you are a relativist about the truth of ascriptions of beauty, and some of the implications of your view—for instance its implications for content—may be easier to bring into focus when it is taken in the latter guise.

A final point of emphasis. According to the preceding perspective, truth-relativism comes by incremental stages, the earlier among which need not involve that the postulated extra parameter(s) should implicate any kind of subjectivity or anthropocentricity. Of course many of the proposals that make up the 'usual suspects'—perspective, point of view, sensibility, standards of taste—explicitly do so. But that doesn't have to go with assessment-relativity as such: one possible counter-example (to be reviewed later) is provided by Aristotelianism about the future. Here the additional element of relativity is merely time: no subjectivity need be involved in the idea that a proposition depicting a sea-fight at t is true at t —if a sea-fight occurs—but is untrue at any time before its occurrence. The metaphysical view in question would equally apply to future contingents at a world altogether free of human agency or perspective. In general, the connections between truth-relativism and the 'pluralism' or 'perspectivalism' of the Protagorean tradition are not straightforward: the former is neither sufficient—nor, I would argue, necessary¹¹—for the latter.

¹¹ I have it in mind that the notion of a discourse's failing to exert Cognitive Command, in the sense of my (1992), is an adequate vehicle for a sober pluralism, and that its characterization requires no use of a relative truth-predicate. But I cannot elaborate this thought here. Cf. Wright (2006).

7.3 THE TRADITIONAL MISGIVING

There has always been a major question whether any interesting form of relativism about truth is so much as coherent. Everyone knows one classic kind of argument why not: if truth is relative, then the thesis that truth is relative is itself at best only relatively true, and that—for reasons which are seldom clearly stated—supposedly somehow makes it abrogate its own cogency, or dialectically undermine the position of one who advocates it. This is one form of (what we may call) the *traditional misgiving*.¹² Is it compelling?

Perhaps the most immediate observation is that the objection seems to presuppose that the relativity in relativism must be to something optional, so that the relativist may always be confounded by shifting the value of the parameter involved in such a way that the very relativistic thesis is itself incorrect. The idea seems to be that if the thesis of truth-relativism is itself only relatively true, then an opponent can always deflect the thesis by judicious parameter selection, as it were. We have already noted that this need not be so. The extra parameter(s) may be something whose values are settled independently of any contingencies of anthropology or personality. And even if not, the upshot need only be, at worst, that that truth of relativism would itself be somehow dependent on contingencies of human perspective. Such a result need no more “optionalize” the acceptability of the view than—supposing it is so—the relativity of colour to human sensibility makes it optional what to think about the colour of the sky.¹³

There are other pressures worth reviewing, distinct from the traditional misgiving, to think that global truth-relativism is incoherent. Two of them I’ll label, in a Quinean spirit, ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. Both can be elicited just by reflection upon the general form of the idea that truth is relative to a ‘context of assessment’—that it is, so to speak, ‘in the eyes of an assessor’—without

¹² Its locus classicus is of course Socrates’ dissection of Protagoras’ ideas in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. The modern discussion includes Jordan (1971), Meiland (1977) and (1979), Seigel (1986), and Swayer (1982).

¹³ There is a subtler response to this form of the traditional misgiving. Reflect that the assumption that relativism is committed to regarding its own proper statement as only relatively true is unfounded in any case unless it is taken that relativism is a global thesis, extending to *all* truth-evaluable contents. However the thought that if the thesis of relativism is merely relatively true—true relative to the particular value of some relevant parameter which the relativist instantiates—then it may be seen off by calibrating oneself, as it were, to instantiate a suitable different value, seems to presuppose that what is true once such a value is settled is itself an *absolute* matter; that is why the deflection requires a different selection. Whereas a global relativism must also embrace judgements of the form that the relativistic thesis is true relative to v_i , for variable values v_1, \dots, v_n , of the relevant parameter V . In that case, the contention that relativism is incorrect relative to some v_i will itself be merely relatively true. So when the anti-relativist triumphantly announces that he has so calibrated himself that, relative to his value of V , the thesis of relativism is incorrect, he is open to the rejoinder that such a claim is itself at most relatively correct and cannot therefore be presumed to hold in an arbitrary context of assessment—in particular, not that of his relativist opponent. I leave the further prosecution of this dialectic to the reader!

troubling to enquire how exactly the idea of a context of assessment is to be understood, what variables it encompasses.

The pressure from below emerges like this. There is among modern proponents no suggestion that truth depends *only* on the standards of an assessor, or other aspects of a 'context of assessment'. It will also depend on an *input*: the material to be assessed (the 'circumstances of evaluation', a *world*). This input must presumably allow of propositional articulation in turn, so the question arises how the truth of *these* propositions—those that characterize the worldly input—is to be conceived. If it is conceived non-relativistically, then we are not after all dealing with global relativism. But if it too is conceived relativistically, then a regress is launched: the truth (in a context of assessment) of each relativistic proposition depends on the truth of another proposition articulating the relevant circumstances of evaluation—and when relativism is global, this too is in each case a relativistic proposition. Note, however, that this regress ascends through an infinity of types of *logically independent* proposition; for nothing follows just from the description of the circumstances of evaluation—from the input propositions—at any particular stage about which among the relevant truth-relativised propositions are true; and conversely, or so one would suppose, nothing follows just from the true relativistic propositions at each stage about exactly which of the relevant input propositions are true. The result is an epistemological problem. Mastery of the relativistic truth-conditions of propositions at each level in the regress will presumably require grasp of the truth-conditions of propositions describing the relevant kind of circumstances of evaluation, or worldly input, for them; so the threat is that mastery of the former will involve an implicitly infinitary range of propositional understanding, not in the benign sense of something recursive with a finite base but in a sense that makes it unattainable.

The pressure from above is this. In general, that P is true relative to circumstances C and parameter V looks like an *absolute* claim, whereas global truth-relativism will have to construe the truth of such claims as relative in turn. So parameters will have to be identified to which the truth of these absolute-seeming claims will itself be relative. This is very implausible in most cases, and will be additionally so if the very same parameter is just repeated. Claims, for instance, about what is true relative to certain ethical standards, if they themselves have some implicit relativity, are at least, presumably, not relative to *ethical* standards. What coherent account can be given of such an ascending hierarchy of invoked standards, or other relativistic parameters? Does it stabilize in some one Master Parameter, to which all truths above a certain level are relative? Or is there a literally endless variety?

I don't know whether either of these misgivings, or others, can be developed to the point of conclusiveness. It would be of interest finally to resolve the question whether a global truth-relativism can be a coherent stance. But I do not think it is important to do so. Even if the global thesis is incoherent, the fact is that the

relativist views in contemporary debate are typically local—to epistemic modals, morals, knowledge ascriptions, or conditionals, for instance. As far as I am aware, each of the relativist positions in these local debates is quite comfortable alongside an absolutist view of the philosophical thesis that truth for the relevant locality is relative. (Indeed, as a limiting case, one might hold that truth in philosophy is absolute but relative everywhere else!)¹⁴

7.4 TRUTH-RELATIVISM AND REPRESENTATION

We are entertaining the idea that for certain kinds of proposition, *P*, truth is to be thought of as fixed not merely by a world—a set of circumstances of evaluation—but by a world-cum-context-of-assessment. Call this the *ternary model*. Thus it may happen, one would suppose, where standards, say, are the relevant variable within contexts of assessment, that *P* is true by *S*₁ in *w*_A, but false by *S*₂ in *w*_A. Considerations not far from the territory just reviewed now suggest that the ternary model is inconsistent with *P*'s possession of *representational* content. For what state of affairs might we think of *P* as representing? Nothing, presumably, that might be mentioned in a compendious description of *w*_A—since those matters are all, as far as they go, neutral on the question of the truth of *P*, whereas the obtaining of a state of affairs of a kind represented by *P* would have to suffice for its truth. But nor are we at liberty to think of *P* as representing some state of affairs of the form: *by standard so-and-so, such-and-such is the case*—for that would be to misrepresent its content. As noted, facts about standard relativity are not in general plausibly taken to be themselves standard-relative; and even when they are, they are not plausibly taken to be relative to the same standards. But what other candidate type of state of affairs is there for *P* to represent? It looks as though the ternary model excludes representationality.

This is hardly surprising if, as I think is so, representing is an essentially binary relation holding between a *representans* and the matter (if any) that it represents. In saying that, I am not overlooking that whether something successfully pictures, or encodes, or in some other way represents something else, may depend on conventions of representation, or a 'method of projection', variation in which may lead to the question of successful representation getting a varying answer. But of course that's an irrelevant consideration. Varying the 'method of projection' is to be compared with varying the *content*—and our interest all along has

¹⁴ An arresting argument against the coherence even of certain *local* forms of truth-relativism is offered by Paul Boghossian in his contribution to this volume. It applies to any form of truth-relativism where the claimed relativity is to standards and where standards are thought of—as seems most natural and intelligible—as consisting in a set of general propositions informing the assessment of particular cases. Considerations of space prevent me from including here the discussion of it that I offered in my presentation at the Barcelona workshop. I do so in Wright (2008a).

been in the nature of representation (and truth) *after* content has been fixed. That is why we are focused on truth for propositions. Representation, once the conventions of representation have been fixed, surely *is* essentially a binary relation. So having the kind of content fit to represent something is—in the case of propositions—having the kind of content that fits a bearer to stand in a binary *true-of* relation. Propositions for which the ternary truth model is appropriate cannot, on that account, have that kind of content.

I do not want to belabour the point, but maybe it is worth pausing over. Cannot representation, it might be objected, be *perspectival*? Indeed, it is suggestive that at least one writer in the vanguard of the recent surge of interest in relativism uses exactly the term, “perspective”, as a catch-all to denote the kind of parameters to which relative truth is supposedly relative *to*.¹⁵ Perhaps only perspective-free representation is essentially binary. But clearly the fidelity of, say, a visual representation—a diagram, or a photograph—to the shape of an object can depend upon settling a notional perspective. For example, these figures

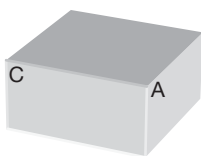


Figure 7.1

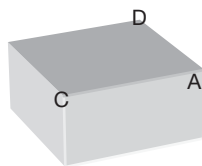


Figure 7.2

are potentially both adequate representations of one and the same solid object once it is specified that the respectively implied angles of view are such that first the point A, and then the point C, are to be thought of as representing that part of the object that is closest to an observer; but not if it is given that the closest points are A and D. Successful representation can be and often is *perspectival*—that is, in the present kind of example, relative to an implied angle of view—in this kind of way. So, it may be thought, it does *not* go with the very idea of representation that it be a purely binary relation; and there is, correspondingly, no reason why a theorist who thinks of the truth of propositions in some region of discourse as involving relativity to an assessment-parameter should thereby foreclose on their representationality either.

The analogy has the additional feature, attractive for the relativist purpose, that there is a sense in which the above figures are *incompatible*: they cannot both be accepted as accurate representations of one and the same figure from any single perspective (implied angle of view). On the other hand, they can both be accurate from a suitable pair of perspectives, and a pair of thinkers, occupying those perspectives can, in respectively endorsing their accuracy, both be right.

¹⁵ Kölbel (2002).

Is it along the lines of this analogy that we should try to fashion our thinking about truth-relativism about propositions and the idea of faultless disagreement? Well, only if we can think of the ‘contents’ carried by such figures as comparable to propositions. We have an analogue of the sought-after idea—that of a species of proposition which is representational in content all right, but where the fact of actual representation turns on perspective, or point of view—only if we suppose that the content of the figures is invariant under changes in perspective or point of view. It is here, obviously, that the analogy breaks down. Of course *something* is invariant under changing perspective. The diagrams don’t change shape, and the lines continue to represent edges, and so on. But it is clear that what is unchanging is not representational content: i.e., how the object is being represented as shaped. Suppose you are told that Figure 1 *is* an accurate representation of an aspect of some solid object; what do you thereby learn about the object’s shape? The answer *varies with perspective*. If you are also told that the implied angle of view is such that point A on the diagram represents the nearest point of the object to the observer, you learn that three of its sides are configured in a way consistent with its being a cuboid. If you are told only that point A on the diagram does not represent the nearest point of the solid to the observer, you do not learn that and then there are any number of other possibilities. Perspective—the implied angle of view—in such cases is accordingly first a parameter in the determination of *representational content*, and only secondarily in the determination of whether the figure successfully represents. Whereas—to stress again—truth-relativism at the level of propositions sees truth-value as variable in tandem with variation in some relevant parameter *after* content has been fixed.

There is no doubt a lot more to be said, but—with a qualification to follow—I think we can reasonably take it that further reflection should be constrained by the following *Non-Representationality Conjecture*:

Truth-relativism, construed along the lines of the ternary model, excludes the representationality of the propositional contents concerned.

A number of questions are pertinent if the Conjecture is accepted. First, any good argument for a (local) truth-relativism at the level of propositions should implicate grounds for denying that the contents in question are representational. One crux for representational content for which I have argued elsewhere is the constraint of *Cognitive Command*: a constraint which a discourse satisfies just in case it’s a priori that differences of opinion within it—where they do not fall among certain admissible exceptions: difference of opinion due to vagueness, for instance, or idiosyncratically varying thresholds of evidence—will turn on something properly viewed as a *cognitive shortcoming*. If, as I have argued,¹⁶ Cognitive Command is a necessary condition for representationality, then one

¹⁶ Wright (1992), 88 and *passim*.

natural channel for argument for truth-relativism will be to make a case for a failure of Cognitive Command. It may not be the only possible channel. However, whatever argument is advanced if informed by the ternary model, must—in the presence of the Non-Representationality Conjecture—somehow carry the conclusion that the discourse in question is not representational.

There is also a good question about why, if the Non-Representationality Conjecture is correct, anyone should want to propose truth-relativism for any of the broadly anti-realist reasons that have been traditional.¹⁷ For if there is a solid case that a particular discourse is not representational in content, that *already* undermines the realism associated with absolutism. If ethical discourse, for instance, is not representational, we already have the conclusion that there are no absolute moral facts, since if there were such facts, they would have to allow of representation by moral thought. What need, then, to claim an additional relativity in the notion of moral truth? Some deflated or minimalist line of goods will serve all purposes worth serving.

The connections between relativism and representationality are complicated, however, by the realization that not everything that's been presented as an example of truth-relativism is happily thought of in terms of the ternary model. Consider, for example, the Aristotelian view of future contingents, recently argued by John MacFarlane to provide an example of a view which calls for the kind of truth-relativism he thinks may be coherent and stable.¹⁸ Suppose at t_0 that X asserts that there will be a sea fight at t_2 , = P. According to the Aristotelian, it will be correct for an assessor, Y, at t_1 , $< t_2$, to assert that X's assertion that P was untrue. It will be correct because there is nothing at t_0 or at t_1 to render P true—the future is open. But at t_2 it will be appropriate for Y to assert that X's assertion that P was true if—as we may suppose—a sea fight is then in full swing. So the very same content—that of X's assertion at t_0 —is correctly assessed as untrue at t_1 but true at t_2 .

Now it is of course perfectly true that we *can* cast the example in the form of the ternary model, with *time of assessment* in the slot occupied by 'perspective', or 'standards', in the other kinds of case. We can, if we like, include time of assessment as one more variable under the umbrella of 'context of assessment' in the ternary model. But it seems to me that this is a bad idea if we want to avoid confusion. It's certainly a bad idea if we are persuaded of the correctness of the Non-Representationality Conjecture, since the Aristotelian does not at all mean to contest the representationality of ordinary tensed discourse about mundane events like sea fights. What he means to contest, rather, is the ordinary *static metaphysics* of the being of such events: his view is that the future unfolds not in the sense of *revealing* itself as we reach it in time, but in the sense of, literally, *becoming*.

¹⁷ Of course these contrast with the putative empirico-linguistic reasons prominent in MacFarlane's writings and those of other recent authors in the field.

¹⁸ MacFarlane (2003) and (this volume).

Aristotelianism is not at all a view about the *degree* of utterance/propositional truth—it is, for example, consistent with the most robustly correspondence conception of truth. On the contrary, it's a view about the metaphysical behaviour of the *truth-conferers*. We can, if we like, caption it by saying that it holds that truth is relative to time—but what it really holds is that the *population of facts that constitutes the actual world* changes with time. The ternary model, properly understood, fixes the worldly parameter and *then* allows truth to vary as a function of 'context of assessment'. By contrast, what's happening in the Aristotelian metaphysics of time is that the *world itself* is varying with time, and truth at a time is varying accordingly. There is no genuinely additional parameter of context of assessment. Aristotelian truth-relativism is a kind of Fool's truth-relativism: a thesis about the nature of the world misconceived as a thesis about the degree of the truth relation.

Once that distinction is in the open, it's salient that the Aristotelian model could also be extended to the standards-and-taste varieties of truth-relativism. What, in effect, the Aristotelian view provides for is a plurality not merely of possible but of *actual* worlds, as indexed by the class of propositions that are true at them. The world at t_1 and the world at t_2 are both actual—that is why P changes its truth status as the passage of time takes us from one to the other. But once we have the prototype of time supplying different locations for actual worlds, what is to stop us allowing other forms of locality as well? We might for example permit the actual world *at Williamson*—that is the actual world as reflected in Timothy Williamson's gustatory standards—to exist simultaneously with the actual world *at Wright*, that is, the actual world as reflected in Crispin Wright's gustatory standards. The proposition that stewed rhubarb is delicious can then be true at the one aesthetic location, so to say, and untrue at the other, just as the proposition about the sea fight can be true at t_2 but untrue at t_1 . No need, in this case, to resort to a context of assessment parameter in order to accommodate the truth-relativist impulse—truth can be old-fashioned truth-at-a-world, *simpliciter*. The relativism surfaces, rather, in the thought that there is no single actual world but a plurality of them.

No doubt these worlds may substantially overlap. The thought that truth-relativism can plausibly only be a local doctrine can be accommodated within this framework by insisting that some denizens of any actual world will be denizens of all. Much of each actual world, perhaps, is made for us, but—the picture will be—we, each of us, individually and collectively, by our sensibilities, tastes and perspectives, give rise to locally variable actualities, partially creating our own domains of truth-conferers.

Maybe the right conclusion is that we need to distinguish two utterly different forms of propositional truth-relativism. One offers a package of the ternary model of truth for selected regions of thought and discourse, together with non-representationality of content, an implicit distinction from non-relativistic areas of thought and talk, and a single actual world fit for representation. The other

says nothing unorthodox about truth or content; it is, for example, consistent with both correspondence and deflationist accounts as holding across the board. But it abandons the idea of a single, comprehensive Tractarian world—a totality of all facts.

No doubt this distinction complicates the question of motivation. It also complicates the question of obligation: a good argument for truth-relativism about some class of propositions must, it appears, either enforce the thought that they lack representational content—so some other conception of their content will be owing—or it must enforce a pluralistic conception of the actual. Again, we should keep these points in mind when reviewing the considerations marshalled by those who are sympathetic towards (local) truth-relativism.

7.5 WEATHER-REPORT RELATIVISM AND NON-REPRESENTATIONALITY

The point still stands, it seems, that a theorist who is drawn to relativism about some region of discourse but wants no traffic with a pluralistic conception of the actual, is committed to thinking of the contents with which the discourse in question characteristically trades as non-representational. Call such a content a NRP (non-representational proposition). It is clearly an obligation on the relativist to say more about this species of content. We already remarked on the relativist's obligation to make a case that these contents are genuinely shared across disputes in which the protagonists differ merely in the values taken by relevant parameters in their respective assessment contexts; equivalently, to argue against any form of opposed contextualist suggestion that it is *content* that varies across such disputes. An account is also owing of the aptitude of such contents for all the usual propositional-logical and attitudinal constructions: they must be negatable, conditionalizable, believable, supposable, doubtable, and so on, and a story must be told about the commitments of one who takes any of these attitudes to an NRP. It is my impression that much more needs to be said to address these issues. But I will not try to explore them further here.¹⁹

What I want to canvass in this section is one, in some ways disappointingly deflationary account of what NRPs could turn out to be. Consider again the example of reports of the weather of the type, "It is snowing", "It is windy" etc. For reasons to be outlined shortly, these do not seem promising as candidates for

¹⁹ Those who assert a relativistic proposition presumably commit themselves to its correctness in the assessment context that coincides with the context of its assertion. The crucial question is what commitments are undertaken with respect to other contexts of assessment. MacFarlane has proposed that such an assertor commits to the continuing assertibility of the proposition in question in *any* assessment context, no matter what the value of the relevant parameter in that context. There are theoretical pressures towards this proposal but it seems like an extravagant, even an irrational commitment to undertake. See MacFarlane (2005a), § 5.

truth-relativistic construal. But they certainly pass the most basic of our intuitive tests: there is indeed, plausibly, no such thing as its simply being the case that it is snowing or not—there is the possibility of a true or false verdict whether it is snowing only when the issue is understood to pertain to a particular location. So while no one has, to the best of my knowledge, seriously proposed a relativistic account of weather reports, it is very easy to envisage the beginnings of one. The relevant assessment-contextual parameter would simply be place: “It is snowing” as uttered by T would be correctly assessed by A as true just in case there is snow falling at the place and time of A’s assessment.

It will, of course, be immediately objected that this gets the truth-conditions of such utterances grossly wrong: that what, for competent judges, determines whether or not T speaks truly is not *their* meteorological predicament, at the time and place of assessment, but that of T at the time and place of the utterance. But that claim is certainly not exceptionless. Invited while in St. Andrews to express an opinion on the weather currently in New York, I may venture simply, “It is mild and raining”. So the immediate objection was only a first approximation. A better formulation would be that what determines the place with respect to which an utterance of “It is raining” is to be assessed is the intention of the speaker, not the context of an assessor.

Even this, however, is not the real objection to weather-report relativism. The point about speaker-intention can be conceded consistently with the broader spirit of relativism. That broader spirit requires only that “It is raining” and its family be viewed as expressing propositions whose truth-evaluability then depends upon settling a place. This place is left to be determined as *some* kind of function of context of assessment. But there is no particular reason why that function should require it to coincide with the place of assessment. It can be that the way in which context of assessment determines the relevant place is, sometimes or normally, via interpretation of the intentions of an utterer. This is still relativism: one and the same proposition is still conceived as expressed by utterances of “It is raining” in different locations and its truth-value is still conceived as relative to place. It is just that (the rules of assessment determine that) the relevant places are the places that the respective utterers intend.²⁰

Nevertheless, this whole direction stands opposed to what may seem like utter commonsense on the matter. According to commonsense, when you truly utter (A) “It is raining” in New York and at the same time I truly utter (B) “It is not raining” in St. Andrews, it is not that we disagree faultlessly—rather, we do (or need) not disagree *at all*. According to the extended relativist proposal, we respectively affirm and deny the same content—hence the disagreement—but that content requires assessment with respect to different places—hence faultlessness. And against this, it would be normal to deny the first: to report us instead as

²⁰ This is actually an example of the extended form of relativism rather unhappily termed “non-indexical contextualism” by John Macfarlane. See especially his (2005b).

having been *speaking of* different places, the lack of any overt reference to place in the uttered sentences notwithstanding. The relativist treatment mislocates the parameter of place when it leaves it to be settled by assessment-context, whatever the proposed mechanism of settlement. Rather, it belongs in the *content* of the propositions respectively expressed and is settled by that.

That's the respect in which weather-report relativism essentially offends commonsense intuition. Naturally, the commonsensical view engenders theoretical obligations. If it is right, then in uttering the weather-reports (A) and (B), we speak of different places using forms of words that explicitly contain no vocabulary of place. An account needs to be given of how this is achieved. Familiarly, the matter is contentious. One proposal is that a reference to place is an *unarticulated constituent* of the propositions expressed.²¹ Another is that the reference to place occurs at the level of the deep syntax of the uttered sentences—that there is, so to say, a hidden indexical expression for which context of utterance serves to supply a reference in the normal kind of way. There is much to say about the content of these contrasting proposals and their respective advantages and problems.²² But on both of them, the contents respectively affirmed by utterance (A) and negated by utterance (B), when identified with the propositions expressed, are not the same.

A serious relativistic proposal about weather descriptions will hold that the content affirmed by (A) and negated by (B) *is* the same, but that it is a content which is truth-evaluable only when relativized to a place. However, this proposal stands opposed to both those just adumbrated only when the mention of contents is construed as a reference to *propositions*; that is, to complete, truth-evaluable thoughts. The relativist proposal takes it that tokens of “It is raining” and its ilk express fully articulated, complete propositions, albeit propositions whose truth-values vary with a parameter which is unrepresented in their logical form. So there is an evident question: why assume that tokens of those sentences express any such *fully articulated* propositions? The alternative is to think of the assignment of a value to the place parameter as serving to *complete* the propositions, rather than set up the means to assess it—completing it, for example, by assigning a referent either to an unarticulated constituent or to a hidden indexical for place.

The exact details of the opposing view do not matter. The crucial point is that the relativist is making an assumption in taking his distinctive direction against such views. For the case of weather reports, it is the assumption that “It is raining” and its ilk provide a fully articulate and explicit expression of the logical form of the relevant, allegedly truth-relativistic propositions. In this case, it is, as noted, most people's inclination to regard the assumption as

²¹ See Perry (1998).

²² For further discussion, see Perry loc cit., Stanley (2000), Recanati (2002), and Cappelen and Lepore (forthcoming).

false. But the crucial point is that this general form of theoretical dispute must arise *in every instance*—every region of discourse—where some kind of case for assessment-relativity can be made. For wherever there is such a case, there will be the option of supposing either that the propositions expressed by the targeted sentences contain unarticulated constituents referring to values of the assessment-contextual parameter which features in the relativist account, or that they contain hidden indexicals with the same range of reference, whose values are settled by features of an assessment context. The latter would, admittedly, be an unusual kind of indexical. But perhaps it is to the existence of such unusual indexicals that linguistic data that might otherwise seem to support relativism would be best construed as pointing.

To fix ideas, suppose we are inclined to a relativistic account of taste-evaluations like “Stewed rhubarb is delicious”, according to which a single proposition thereby fully explicitly expressed is correctly evaluated as true by Tim Williamson’s gustatory standards but false by mine. According to the “hidden indexicals” proposal, there is no such single proposition so evaluated. Rather the proposition expressed is of the deep syntactic form: [stewed rhubarb is delicious by *x*], where ‘*x*’ marks a place for an indexical for standards, whose value is normally²³ fixed as the standards of one assessing the claim. So Tim and I evaluate different propositions, one making mention of his gustatory standards, and the other making mention of mine. And it is the same on the unarticulated propositional constituents proposal; the difference is merely that the references to standards respectively effected by the propositions concerned correspond to nothing in the syntactic structure, even the deep syntactic structure, of the sentence but are supplied by pragmatic factors which vary in the two assessment-contexts.

It is this latter train of thought that promises the “disappointingly deflationary” account of NRPs advertised at the start of this section. On this proposal, “Rhubarb is delicious” expresses *no* complete, truth-evaluable proposition. The content common to “Tim thinks that rhubarb is delicious” and “Crispin doubts that rhubarb is delicious” is indeed non-representational. But it is also non-truth-evaluable. What are truth evaluable are the propositions that uses of the above sentences pragmatically convey as the respective contents of Tim’s and Crispin’s attitudes. But these are not NRPs: they are regular relational propositions about what passes muster by standards they mention; they represent, and—we may presume—they take their truth-values absolutely. On this view, there are no NRPs. The forms of words that seem to express them do not, semantically, express propositions at all. Rather they are, so to speak, sawn-off expressions of proposition radicals—as it were, propositional *amputees*—whose completion is

²³ Evidence: suppose you have never tasted rhubarb and ask whether Tim spoke truly when he said that rhubarb is delicious. Your interest is unlikely to be in whether he spoke truly by *his* standards.

accomplished by the pragmatics of assessment, and whose completed products are regular propositions, true or false in regular ways.

7.6 CAN TRUTH-RELATIVISM BE MOTIVATED BY PURELY LINGUISTIC DATA?

Let us nevertheless persist with the idea that there are genuine NRPs—full-fledged propositions for which truth is relativistic in some parameter, V , of assessment-context. To each such proposition, corresponds a range of explicitly relational propositions (ERPs), each of the form: it is true that P relative to value v of V (“That rhubarb is delicious is true relative to Tim Williamson’s gustatory standards”, “That there could be snipers over the rise is true relative to the information possessed by the platoon commander”). ERPs, it is natural to think, will not in general themselves be candidates for relativistic truth, and indeed there are worries, some canvassed earlier, one to be outlined below,²⁴ about the coherence of views that allow otherwise. However they will all be associated, naturally, with possible assessment as true or false. So here is a question we can ask about a given species of (putative) NRPs and the corresponding range of ERPs: must any context in which it is possible competently to assess an ERP in the latter range itself supply a value, v , for each assessment parameter, V , relative to which the relevant NRPs take their truth-values? In other words, if you are in position competently to assess a claim of the form

P is true relative to value v of parameter V ,

must your situation itself incorporate a value for V , and so commit you to your own assessment of the truth-value of P ?

A quick review of the types of discourse for which modern truth-relativists have proposed the view shows a mixed picture. There is, for example, no particular reason why a subject with no gustatory standards or predilections—perhaps someone born with no taste-buds—should be hampered when it comes to assessing “Stewed rhubarb is delicious by Tim Williamson’s standards”; she can have exactly the same evidence—Tim’s sayings, actions and reactions—as the rest of us. Similarly, there seems no reason why an utterly amoral subject—one party to no moral standards whatever—should be hampered when it comes to the assessment of claims of the form, “Incest is wrong by Western standards”, or “Welfare-maximizing punishment of the innocent is permissible by strict utilitarian standards”. But suppose we take a relativistic view of, say, logic, holding that, notwithstanding a uniform understanding of its logical vocabulary, one and the same propositional schema, e.g. Peirce’s Law, is valid by classical standards but invalid by intuitionistic ones. Here the assessment of the relevant ERPs itself

²⁴ In the Postscript.

demands propositional inference, and hence implicates a set of rules of inference. So there has, presumably, to be an answer to the question whether Peirce's Law may be validated by just those rules. Whether that commits an assessor to a view about Peirce's Law depends, of course, on what the answer to that question is. If the answer is "no", the matter will turn on whether the assessor takes it that the rules he is using to assess the two ERPs are the strongest sound such rules. So logical relativism offers a kind of intermediate, *partially committed*, case, lying between *neutral* cases like, seemingly, ethics and aesthetics, where competent second-order assessment—assessment of an ERP—need involve no commitment to any particular first-order assessment—assessment of the associated NRP—and cases where there always has to be such a commitment. It is the latter that I am calling *fully committed* cases. Are there any examples of this kind?

Certainly, at least according to proposals made by contemporary relativists. Suppose, for example, that epistemic possibility claims, "It might be that P", take their truth-values relative to the state of information of an assessor.²⁵ The relevant ERPs then take the form, "It is true that it might be that P, relative to state of information I". But to assess any such claim, you have of course yourself to be in *some* kind of state of information; and that, whatever it is, will itself presumably mandate a verdict about the epistemic possibility of P. So if truth for epistemic possibility claims is assessment-relative in this way, then they provide an example of a fully committed case.

It will presumably be similar with the view that knowledge-attributions are assessment-relative²⁶—that whether X knows that P depends upon the standards of an assessor. Suppose you are in position to assess whether X knows that P relative to certain demanding standards for knowledge. Then your situation will presumably both involve awareness of what comprises X's relevant information and cognitive state and a set of standards—perhaps less demanding—of your own for the ascription of knowledge that P to X. So you will be committed to a view about whether X does know that P.

There is a third very salient example: precisely the (putatively) Aristotelian view that the truth-value of contingent propositions concerning singular events is relative to *time* of assessment. We are, ineluctably, stationed in time. So an Aristotelian thinker called upon to assess the truth-value of a proposition of the form, 'What Aristipides asserted at t_0 by saying, "There will be a sea-battle tomorrow", is (tenseless) true at t_1 ,' will himself occupy a station in time relative

²⁵ They don't always—there are apparent cases of *deferential* uses, where an assessor reports, or colludes in a possibility for an audience or third party: a Red platoon commander may order his trainee soldiers to "Keep down: there could be snipers on the hill", even though he knows there are no Blue positions in the area. For sympathetic proposal of assessment-relativism for epistemic modals, see MacFarlane (2003a and 2006b), Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherston (2004), Egan (2005) and Stephenson (2005). Critical discussions of epistemic possibility relativism include Dietz (this volume) and Wright (2007). We will focus on this example in a moment.

²⁶ See MacFarlane (2005a).

to which Aristipides' prediction will have or will not have (yet) come to fruition; and so will be committed to his own assessment of that prediction.

What is the interest of the notion of a fully committed case? That there is an interesting difficulty about characterizing what, in principle, would constitute good linguistic evidence for a truth-relativistic semantic treatment of any region of discourse where it would have the effect that the discourse in question was fully committed. Consider for example, the way that John MacFarlane and others have actually tried to motivate relativism about epistemic possibility claims. MacFarlane writes

Here's the puzzle. When we claim 'It might be the case that *p*' and later come to know that not-*p* (for example, by being told this by a trusted authority), we tend to *withdraw* our earlier assertion and regard what we said as false. That is, we tend to assess past assertions containing epistemic modals against our *current* epistemic situations, rather than the epistemic situations in which they were made. Consider the following dialogue:

Dialogue 1

Sally: Joe might be in Boston. (= It might be the case that Joe is in Boston.)

George: He can't be in Boston. (= It is not the case that it might be the case that Joe is in Boston.) I saw him in the hall five minutes ago.

Sally: Oh, then I guess I was wrong.

This is not what one would expect if the standard semantics for epistemic modals were correct. If the truth-conditional content of Sally's original claim is just that she does not (at the time) know that Joe is not in Boston, then she should not retract this claim upon learning that Joe is not in Boston. What she said is still true, even though she could not *now* truly say "Joe might be in Boston." So if the contextualist semantics is correct—the Simple version, at any rate—then we should expect the last line of the dialogue to be:

Sally: Oh, okay. So he can't be in Boston. Nonetheless, when I said "Joe might be in Boston," what I said was true, and I stand by that claim.

I hope you'll agree that it would be odd and unnatural for Sally to say this.²⁷

Let's grant—although I think the point is questionable—that it would be "odd and unnatural" for Sally so to speak. Then that is evidence that we do not understand Sally's original assertion, "Joe might be in Boston", as making a claim about the limitations of her then current state of information, and hence also, if the standard semantics implies otherwise, evidence *against* the standard semantics. But how exactly is this evidence *for* a relativistic semantic treatment? The pattern of the exchange is simply

A: P

B: [new info]

A: I was wrong.

together with an impression that it would be “odd and unnatural” for A to replace his second remark with

A: OK, not-P. Nevertheless when I said ‘P’, what I thereby said was true and I stand by it.

If the latter is incongruous, that does indeed tell against imputing utterance context-sensitivity to the content of tokens of ‘P’. Nevertheless: how could data as austere as this motivate any form of relativism? What is schematized is merely something that fits the withdrawal of any defeasibly grounded, non-context-sensitive assertion.

If a propensity to exchanges of the kind MacFarlane illustrates is to provide any motive at all to start thinking of the truth of epistemic possibility claims as context-of-assessment relative, it has to be supplemented. And what it needs supplementation with, if relativism is to be the right way to go, is evidence of some kind that, her withdrawal of it notwithstanding, Sally’s initial claim is also regarded by competent speakers as having been in some way *perfectly proper*—and this not just in the sense of having been justified though incorrect when she made it. Correctness varies with context of assessment: that claim is the very heart and soul of truth-relativism. So that is what we need to see evidenced in linguistic practice if linguistic practice is to provide evidence for relativism. We have to identify some feature of what strikes us as acceptable linguistic practice which would somehow evince practitioners’ recognition of the propriety of Sally’s initial claim consistently with that of her subsequent retraction of it. Absent any such feature, there is, so far as I can see, absolutely no call for a truth-relativistic response to the (alleged) linguistic data adduced by MacFarlane. We should merely conclude that Sally made an epistemic possibility claim at t_1 that, at t_2 , she recognizes to have been incorrect. She was just wrong before.

The point is simple and general: impressive evidence for the assessment-relativity of truth in some region of discourse has to include some kind of evidence of co-variation of truth-value with the values of an assessment-contextual parameter. You can’t make a case based purely on patterns of *correction*. There has also to be some kind of evidence of *concession* to the propriety of claims made in other assessment contexts—a manifestation of relativistic *even-handedness*. The pattern of linguistic practice—again, I am not, for the sake of argument, challenging its reality—adduced by MacFarlane is merely one-sided, and accordingly unconvincing.²⁸

Very well. So now we need to ask what in principle could amount to such even-handedness suggestive evidence. What is needed is some characteristic means whereby speakers can express an appropriate kind of equality of respect

²⁸ Indeed, it is not merely one-sided. It is actually an *awkwardness* for the relativist that Sally corrects her former self—“Oh. Then I guess I was wrong”—and is not content merely to revise her verdict: “Oh. Then I guess that is wrong”. I discuss this further in Wright (2007).

for contrasting opinions which originate in differences in the values taken by relevant parameters of assessment. But the problem is that if the discourse in question is *fully committed*, any assessor of such an opinion is liable to be stuck with an opinion of his own on the matter in question. Sally has no option, after George's intervention, but to regard her initial claim, that Joe might be in Boston, as false. So the strongest thing she could say by way of respect for it is that she was right to endorse it in the informational state she occupied when she made it. Unfortunately, that kind of endorsement does nothing to distinguish it from any claim that is appropriately advanced on the basis of certain evidence and subsequently withdrawn on the basis of altered evidence. It is, to repeat, no evidence of truth-relativity. Moreover—the crucial point—because discourse of epistemic possibility is fully committed, no other assessor of her claim is going to be able to do any better. Anyone in a position to judge that she spoke correctly on the basis of the information originally available to her will be mandated in an opinion of their own about Joe's possible whereabouts at the time. If it conflicts with hers, they too will be restricted to the form of endorsement of her claim—viz. that she was right to say what she did in the informational state she occupied at the time—which she herself can offer after George's intervention. That's of no interest, as emphasized. But if it coincides with hers, it is of even less interest, from the point of view of one seeking evidence for relativism.

Things look somewhat better if the discourse is neutral. In a neutral discourse, it is still true that a thinker, T, for whom a relevant assessment parameter shifts to a different value will be in no position to endorse a now discarded proposition in any way that evinces the distinctive form of concession to its former relative correctness that we are looking for. But what may be possible is for a third party, U, whose own assessment context takes no value for the relevant parameter, correctly to judge both that each of T's verdicts is correct in the context of assessment in which it is made and—the crucial extra—that neither of T's verdicts is superior in any respect to the other; or superior, at least, in any respect assessable by U. It is the unavailability of the latter claim in fully committed discourses that sets up the obstacle to the relevant kind of even-handed evidence.

However we need a final pair of cautionary distinctions. First, notice that even in such neutral cases, it will take collateral philosophical work to build a case out of the accepted propriety of the relevant kind of even-handed third-party assessments that a relativistic conception of truth operates in the discourse in question. The evidence will be just that a competent neutral assessor, U, can encounter cases where he can recognize first, that each of two conflicting verdicts is sanctioned by differing values of the relevant parameter, V—different standards, let's suppose—operating in the respective contexts of their authors; and second, that neither verdict is based on any shortcoming that U can detect from her position of standard-neutrality. That is perfectly consistent with U's position of standard-neutrality being conceived by practitioners of the discourse as one of *cognitive limitation*; more abstractly, it may be that assessment contexts

which are neutral on the parameter V are, just for that reason, thought of as contexts from which the fact that makes one or other of a relevant pair of conflicting verdicts absolutely correct is *invisible*.

Second, it is in any case—surely—not for *linguistic* evidence to decide whether or not a relativistic view of, say, epistemic possibility claims is appropriate. The most that might be manifest in features of our linguistic practice involving such claims is that *we understand them* as trafficking in assessment-relative contents. We are some considerable way short, I have been suggesting, of a model of the kind of linguistic data that might distinctively manifest even that. But even if we had such a model, and found it exemplified in speakers' practice, that would indicate no more than that they *implicitly conceived* of truth in the region of discourse in question as assessment-relative. That conception could still be philosophically completely unmotivated, or utterly mistaken.²⁹

7.7 POSTSCRIPT

As emphasized, once any global Protagorean ambition is abandoned, and truth-relativism is viewed as an at most locally appropriate view, ERPs, it is natural to expect, will in general be regarded as absolute. But there is one striking exception. The metaphysics of the Open Future is *prima facie* in tension with the so-called Truth-Value Links—the principles which articulate certain necessary connections of truth-value between variously tensed utterances conceived as made at different times. Consider for instance

“There is a Cup Final today” is true at Day₂ if and only if “There will be a Cup Final tomorrow” was true at Day₁.

At first blush, it looks as though this must fail left-to-right on the Aristotelian view—for isn't the whole point that the left-hand side can be true today while the quoted sentence on the right was not true but *indeterminate* yesterday? Yet a willingness to swallow that upshot

... appears incompatible with acknowledging the existence of a systematic link between the truth values

—and hence the contents—

of differently tensed statements uttered at different times.³⁰

²⁹ Thanks to participants at the Barcelona workshop and to members of the Arché 2005–6 Pilot seminar on Contextualism and Relativism for comments and questions on earlier drafts. Special thanks to Paul Boghossian and Sven Rosenkranz for detailed critical discussion and to John MacFarlane for generous written comments.

³⁰ Michael Dummett, in “The Reality of the Past”, 366–7 of his *Truth and Other Enigmas*.

and hence puts in jeopardy the entire basis of our understanding of tense. So what Aristotelians tend to say is that properly to absorb the idea of the Open Future and of the truth-conferrers for future contingents as subject to becoming must involve subjecting truth-conferral to the very constraints expressed by the truth-value links. Thus if “There is a Cup Final today” is true today, then it is also true that “There will be a Cup Final tomorrow” was true yesterday—but the latter is *itself* something that has only *become* true today, with the actual occurrence of the game. What *was* the case is likewise subject to becoming as the future unfolds.

Set this proposal in the context of a truth-relativistic treatment of contingent propositions about singular events, where the relevant assessment-contextual parameter is just time of assessment. We already noted that, so conceived, the discourse in question is fully committed. Now in addition, we are introducing second-order relativity. The ERPs for this discourse take the form:

“P” is (tenselessly) true at *t*.

And what, it is being suggested, goes with saving the intuitive semantics of tense in conjunction with proper absorption of the Open Future is to hold that the truth values of these ERPs are *themselves* relative to time of assessment. So while we can truly say *now* that it is true that

(I) “There will be a Cup Final tomorrow” was true yesterday,

the proper assessment *yesterday* of the same content, viz. that then expressed by a token of

(II) “‘There will be a Cup Final tomorrow’ is true today’,

would have rated it false; for “There will be a Cup Final tomorrow” was then indeterminate.

Well, this is a simple contradiction. For if “There will be a Cup Final tomorrow” was true yesterday, so was “‘There will be a Cup Final tomorrow’ is true today”. So in endorsing (I), we commit ourselves to saying that (II) was true yesterday. So we cannot consistently go on to say that it wasn’t!

This is a reinforced version of the predicament of the epistemic possibility relativist latterly reviewed. There, the fully committed nature of the discourse meant that when a pair of thinkers in distinct assessment contexts correctly return conflicting verdicts on an epistemic possibility claim, there is no way that a third party can avoid disagreement with one of them, so no possibility of the kind of even-handed assessment of their disagreement that relativism ought intuitively to make possible. What the third party can at least do, in that case, is to endorse each of the corresponding ERPs. In the present case, however, even this is not possible. Whatever my station in time, D_1 , it will enjoin not only a view—indeterminate if $D_1 < D_2$; or true, let’s suppose, if $D_1 \geq D_2$ —of the truth-status enjoyed by “There will be a Cup Final tomorrow” at D_1 but also a view—likewise indeterminate so untrue if $D_1 < D_2$; or true if $D_1 \geq D_2$ —of

the truth-status of “‘There will be a Cup Final tomorrow’ is true at D_1 ”. Accordingly, the Aristotelian relativist—at least so long as he determines to preserve the letter of the truth-value links—not merely lacks the resources for an even-handed evaluation of conflicting but respectively context-relatively correct claims about contingent events. He cannot so much as give consistent expression to their being context-relatively correct.³¹

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³¹ This point is elaborated in Wright and Moruzzi (2008).

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