# Relativism and the Metaphysics of Value: A Comment on Daan Evers
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*Daan Evers argues that relativists about aesthetic and other types of evaluative language face some distinctive and largely overlooked metaphysical difficulties concerning the nature of the states of affairs that such statements are intended to be about. These difficulties, as Evers notes, all rest on the assumption that evaluative language is representational. Evers takes it that it is only on this assumption that evaluative relativism is distinguished from expressivism. I argue that this is incorrect and that, without falling into some form of expressivism, relativists can and must drop the representational assumption, but that the resulting position is one in which relativism no longer offers any distinctive dialectical or theoretical advantage.*

## 1. Evers' Challenge

Evers' searching discussion works within a framework in which relativism about value, broadly construed so as to encompass ethical, aesthetic, and perhaps other kinds of value, is set against certain understandings of expressivism and of contextualism. Let us call an *evaluative statement* any that, when simply endorsed, strictly and literally conveys an evaluation on the part of the endorser. An expressivist view about a range of evaluative statements is, for Evers, any view that disputes their truth-conditionality. Such views, he observes, have traditionally struggled to offer properly systematic semantic accounts of the role of evaluative statements occurring as suppositions, or as embedded within, for example, conditionals and ascriptions of attitude. Contextualist views, by contrast, on Evers' understanding of them, retain truth-conditionality and propose that reference to some implicit parameter of assessment—a standard, or perspective, or state of information, for example—is part of the semantic content of an evaluative statement. Such views, familiarly, struggle to explain how, when John asserts that, for example, stewed boletus fungi in béchamel sauce is a delicious dish, and Sara, as it appears, vehemently denies it, a genuine disagreement can be voiced—at least when John and Sara are each correctly assessing the dish from their own standpoints of taste.

Some readers cognisant of the twists and turns taken by modern debates may be inclined to query these characterizations. Certainly, many recent and contemporary theorists who would regard themselves as contextualists, or as expressivists, would dispute them. What is crucial to a contextualist conception of the content of a range of evaluative statements, it may be said, is not that they involve tacit reference to a contextually determined standard, or perspective—so that the propositions expressed have an implicit relational form: for example, that stewed boletus in béchamel sauce is delicious *by such-and-such standards*—but only that, either in that way or some other, their truth-conditions should vary as a function of variation in such a parameter across contexts of use. And

what is essential to expressivism about a range of evaluative statements is not that, their surface form notwithstanding, they actually have a semantic content that pre-empts any issues about their truth or knowability (and thereby also threatens to disqualify them from performing in various respects as genuinely truth-evaluable clauses do) but only that their characteristic use is to give expression to evaluative attitudes, rather than to state facts.[1]

It is arguable, however, or so Evers at any rate might well argue, that these qualifications do not materially affect the overall dialectical situation. A contextualist who holds that the content of John's assertion that 'Stewed boletus fungi in béchamel sauce is delicious' is determined in part by John's gustatory standards not because it involves a tacit reference to them but because, for instance, the satisfaction-condition of '. . . is delicious' is supposed to be sensitive to the speaker's standards, still has some explaining to do in connection with the apparent flat disagreement of John and Sara. And an expressivist who grants that 'Stewed boletus fungi in béchamel sauce is delicious' has a truth- evaluable content, must then re-confront the questions about the nature of this type of content, and about how it is possible to know truths of the relevant kind, that originally motivated the flight from truth-conditionality characteristic of the older, cruder forms of expressivist view.

The form of relativism on which Evers focuses is the species of assessment-sensitivity developed and championed by John MacFarlane, according to which the truth-value of an evaluative statement varies with the particular instance of some parametric property of contexts in which it is *assessed*—a property which, for the cases of value with which we are presently concerned, we may take to be the relevant standards of an assessor.[2] On this view, John's and Sara's *contretemps* is a genuine disagreement, John asserting something which Sara denies. And the content which they dispute is an ordinary indicative content, apt for all the kinds of operations and embeddings which traditional expressivism struggled with. And this is apt to seem as it should be. Yet, in addition, in allowing that evaluative statements do not take their truth values absolutely but only in a fashion sensitive to our standards and tastes, so that an assertion that stewed boletus fungi in béchamel sauce is delicious may be quite correctly accepted as true by John yet quite correctly rejected as false by Sara, relativism may seem to be equipped to acknowledge a lay-philosophically plausible element of subjectivity in at least some of our evaluations which a simple realism about them has no resources to recognize. This again may well seem to many to be as it should be. For these reasons—rather different to those which MacFarlane himself has concentrated in his various local defences of assessment-sensitivity[3]—relativism has seemed to some to possess clear advantages over its principal

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1   Expressivism about a discourse, understood in this way as compatible with its signature sentences' possession of truth-evaluable content, is now the norm. It is, for example, central to Dorit Bar-On's treatment of first person avowals of psychological states (Bar-On, *Speaking My Mind: Expression and Self-Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004)) and to the later proposals about moral discourse of Simon Blackburn (see his *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: OUP, 1998)) and Alan Gibbard's treatment of normative discourse in general (see his *Meaning and Normativity* (Oxford: OUP, 2012)).

2   John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications* (Oxford: OUP, 2014).

3   For MacFarlane, the key piece of evidence supporting a relativist treatment of the truth-conditions of, for example, knowledge ascriptions and claims of epistemic possibility is provided by our alleged patterns of retraction of such claims when our state of information changes in relevant respects, whereas, if a contextualist account of their content were correct, the original claims should be regarded as unimpugned.

rivals (expressivism, contextualism, and simple realism), when the contest is to provide a satisfactory semantics and metaphysics for at least some kinds of evaluations.

Evers presents a new argument that these apparent advantages are illusory. His argument focuses, interestingly, not on objections to relativism on semantic grounds, but on what he perceives as its radical inadequacy as metaphysics. Specifically, to construe evaluative statements as apt only for assessment-sensitive truth is to surrender, he contends, any prospect of a satisfactory account of what it is that *makes* such statements true. Relativism is meant to be a way of conserving the good-standing of (at least some of) our evaluative judgements. So the relativist, he writes, needs to

> make a case that the states of affairs represented by such propositions [evaluative statements] exist. Relativism is, after all, motivated in part by the desire to retain the truth of judgements about value. It is not supposed to be a kind of error theory.

However, merely to offer

> an analysis of the content of a statement does not ordinarily tell us, all by itself, whether the statement is true. It is a further question whether that content corresponds to anything in reality. Let us say that evaluative propositions depict evaluative states of affairs. Do relative evaluative states of affairs exist (evaluative states of affairs as the relativist conceives of them)?[4]

Once the question is so framed, Evers argues, it emerges that relativism has no credible answer. We can take as given, he observes, at least two things about the content of an evaluative statement as relativism conceives it. First, it is to contrast with the content assigned to the statement by rival—contextualist or expressivist—views: a single, truth-evaluable content is to be the focus of the kind of disagreement illustrated by John and Sara. Second, it must be different from the kind of *relational* content exhibited by 'Stewed boletus fungi in béchamel sauce is delicious by John's standards'—since that is a statement whose truth-value is exactly *not* standard-relative (and need anyway not be contested by Sara). Now, it is notable that these features of the content of evaluative statements are also endorsed by *non-naturalist realist* views—something which might expose relativism to an analogue of the kind of objection from 'queerness' urged by John Mackie and others against non-naturalism.[5] But, as Evers points out, it is of course entirely foreign to the spirit of relativism to postulate the kind of objective truth-conferring states of affairs for evaluative statements that non-naturalism deals in as its stock in trade. What is needed, it seems, is a species of states of affairs that are like those postulated by non-naturalism except that they exhibit a curious kind of variability, 'waxing' and 'waning' in response to variations in context of assessment.[6] And this gives rise to a special singularity, owing to

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4    Daan Evers, 'Relativism and the Metaphysics of Value', *BJA* 66 (2021) 75–87.

5    John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Viking, 1977); Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (Oxford: OUP, 2014).

6    Evers cites here Jesse Prinz, who writes that relativism 'seems to imply that the very same property, say wrongness, would come and go depending on who happens to be making a moral claim; if "wrong" always refers to the very same property, why should that property wax and wane as a function of linguistic context?' (Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 182).

> the fact that the relativist's irreducible and non-relational states of affairs are brought into existence by standards, even though those states of affairs do not involve relations to standards . . . So relativists might be worse off than non-naturalists in the sense that non-naturalists can explain why their moral properties do not wax and wane as a function of linguistic context: they do not wax and wane in this way precisely because they are non-relational properties. The relativist seems to lack an explanation why properties that are otherwise identical to the non-naturalist's behave differently.

The idea of worldly states of affairs that 'wax and wane' in response to variations of standards in different contexts of assessment, yet in which those standards are in no way constituent, is unquestionably bizarre. Actually, though, I think Evers could have argued that matters are worse than that. For we—critics—can legitimately stipulate an example where, when John assesses the judgement that stewed boletus fungi in béchamel sauce is delicious as true, and Sara assesses it as false, and both assessments are in keeping with the respective gustatory standards, their respective assessments are made *at the same time*. So now, rather than 'waxing and waning', it seems that we require the world to deliver up *simultaneously* states of affairs that make for the truth of each of what relativism views as a pair of contradictory statements—and this not-withstanding the fact that John and Sara will each respectively rightly deny that the other's assessment is true at all.

So much by way of illustration of the kind of difficulty that Evers canvasses for the metaphysics of relativism. I take it, though—and interpret this as his principal point—that the root problem is that there is a tension within relativism between its face-value conception of the content of evaluative statements and its anthropocentric conception of their metaphysical status. The latter conception has it that it is we, assessors, who provide the metaphysical springs of value. Once you put assessors and the standards they bring to bear to one side, what is left of the World has then no states of affairs to offer that are fitted to make evaluative statements true or false: a world stripped of standards and assessors is, in relativism's view, evaluatively empty. But the face-value construal of evaluative statements has the effect that their representational content is, just as it appears on the surface, innocent of any commitment to us or our standards. The relativist's requirement is thus, it appears, for truth-conferring states of affairs that are, on the one hand, ontologically innocent of standards and assessors—since no even implicit reference to standards or assessors is made by the statements on which they confer truth—yet, on the other, are not to be found anywhere in the world when it is shorn of standards and assessors. It may well seem the merest litotes to conclude, as Evers does, that we lack any reason at all to believe in such things.

## 2. Relativism and Representational Content (1)

An initial reaction to the foregoing line of objection is that it misunderstands the kind of status that evaluative relativism intends evaluative truths to have. Specifically, it

may be countered, the objection mistakenly assumes that the conservative——non-error-theoretic——aspect of relativism requires it to conceive of evaluative truth as *successful representation* of some kind of aspect of the world. It may be doubted that such a notion is anything to which relativists are, or ought to be, committed. Evers in effect acknowledges this:

> Expressivists deny that evaluative claims represent evaluative facts (except in some deflationary sense). It's true that this denial is compatible with different ideas about the nature of evaluative language. Most expressivists think it expresses non-cognitive states. Relativists may give it some other purpose that entails non-representationality. But, first, they would have to explain what this purpose is supposed to be and, second, it may well burden the relativist with the expressivist's problems in philosophical logic and the philosophy of language. In any case, I will proceed on the assumption that relativists want evaluative propositions to represent evaluative aspects of the world. If some relativists reject this assumption, my problems do not touch them.[7]

There are, in my view, crucial questions turning on this assumption——call it the *representational assumption*——to which we will turn in the next section. First, though, it is important to flag the fact that there is a genre of relativism that certainly *does* embrace the representational assumption but——or so I shall argue——can finesse the kind of problem that Evers' discussion highlights.

We can usefully focus on (one understanding of) the Aristotelian view of future contingents. John MacFarlane argues that this——Aristotelianism——provides an example of a view which can profit from regimentation in terms the apparatus of assessment-sensitivity.[8] Thus, suppose that Evers at $t_0$ asserts that there will be a sea fight at $t_2$. According to Aristotelianism, it will be correct for an assessor, Y, at $t_1$, $> t_0$, $< t_2$, to assert that what Evers asserted is untrue. It will be correct because, at times up to and including $t_1$, there is so far nothing to render the assertion true——the future at those times is open and what may or may not be at $t_2$ is in certain respects unsettled. But at $t_2$ it may *become* correct for Y to assert that what Evers asserted at $t_0$ *is* true if——as we may suppose——a sea fight is then, at $t_2$, in full swing. In that case the very same content——that of Evers' assertion at $t_0$——will have been correctly assessed as untrue at $t_1$ but true at $t_2$. Evers' assertion at $t_0$ thus receives variable truth-values, relative to the time at which it is assessed.

This regimentation is designed to insulate Aristotelianism against the contradictions to which, on the assumption of the usual truth-value links, it otherwise threatens to succumb.[9] There is scope for discussion whether the insulation is effective.[10] But let us grant

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7     Daan Evers, 'Relativism and the Metaphysics of Value', *BJA* 66 (2021) 75–87.

8     MacFarlane first argued for this in 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003), 321–336. The argument is refined in 'Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths', in Manuel García-Carpintero and Max Kölbel (eds), *Relative Truth* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 81–102. The case is reprised in chapter 9 of his *Assessment Sensitivity*.

9     For discussion of the difficulties posed by the truth-value links both for the Aristotelian view of the future and for anti-realism about the past, see Crispin Wright, 'Realism, Truth-value Links, Other Minds and the Past', in *Ratio* 22 (1980), 112–132.

10    For misgivings about the ultimate coherence of doing so, however, see Sebastiano Moruzzi and Crispin Wright, 'Trumping Assessments and the Aristotelian Future' *Synthese* 166 (2009), 309–331.

for present purposes that we can coherently regiment the Aristotelian view in this kind of way, with *time of assessment* filling the slot occupied by 'perspective', or 'standards', in other kinds of case and thus as one more available parameter under the 'context of assessment' umbrella. Still, there is a danger of missing an important distinction in so doing. The Aristotelian is no theorist of assessment-sensitivity if that requires the notion that *one and the same state of the world* ('circumstance of evaluation') may legitimately be regarded either as conferring truth on a particular statement, or as conferring falsity on it, depending on variation in some parameter of assessment. There is no single state of the world such that Y, at $t_2$, correctly assesses it as making Evers' prediction true but, at $t_1$, correctly assesses it as failing to do so. The relevant state of affairs, after all, does not, according to the root Aristotelian thought, so much as exist at $t_1$.

What Aristotelianism means to contest is the ordinary *static metaphysics* of the being of such states of affairs: the proposed 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*. The thesis of assessment-sensitivity, by contrast, is naturally understood as proposing a *ternary model* of truth: as postulating that, for at least some classes of statement, truth is a *three-term* relation, holding between a proposition, a potential truth-conferrer, and a mediating third term—a value for a parameter of assessment-context—that somehow serves to determine whether the potential truth-conferrer actually, in the relevant context, confers truth on the proposition in question. The Aristotelian open future involves nothing of that sort but is, indeed, consistent with the most robustly *binary* (correspondence) conception of truth. While we are at liberty, if we like, to caption it by saying that it holds that truth for a certain range of contingent statements is relative to time of assessment, the point remains that the view concerns the metaphysical behaviour of the *truth-conferrers*: it is that the *population of facts that constitutes the actual world* changes with time. By contrast, the ternary model, properly understood, takes the worldly contribution as fixed and *then* allows truth to vary as a function of context of assessment.

So: what is happening in the Aristotelian metaphysics of time is that the *totality of facts* is varying with time, and truth at a time is varying accordingly. There is no genuinely additional parameter of context of assessment. If assessment-sensitivity is understood as essentially involving an elevation of the degree of the truth-relation, then Aristotelianism may seem to present itself as a kind of Fool's assessment-sensitivity: a thesis about the nature of the world misrepresented, or misunderstood, as a thesis about the -adicity of 'true'.

That distinction duly noted, it would, however, be the merest imperialism to insist that it is assessment-sensitivity that captures the real relativism, as it were, and that the model provided by the Aristotelian view of the future is a mere ersatz relativism. Better, instead, simply to recognize two very different species of alethic relativism. And what is salient is that the Aristotelian model involves a clear commitment to the representational assumption. The whole point is that what is true at a time depends on what states of affairs exist at that time to be represented. The salient question is therefore: must the Aristotelian stripe

of relativism, in accepting the representational assumption, succumb to objections of the kind lodged by Evers? In my view, it need not.

I am not denying that Aristotelianism about the future is up to its neck in the imagery of states of affairs that 'wax', at least, with the passage of time.[11] It certainly is, but I do not think that is the real nub of Evers' complaints. The more serious questions concern how to conceive of the states of affairs that serve to confer truth and falsity upon evaluative statements when the latter are relativistically understood: how, when such of states of affairs have no ingredient standards or assessors, as a face-value construal of the representational content of evaluative statements seems to require, they may nevertheless obtain, or not, in step with correct assessments by variable standards, and how they may consistently co-obtain in cases of disagreement where no party makes any mistake by their own standards.

As a first step, let us drop the—non-compulsory—picture of a single actual world whose population of states of affairs varies with time and see the Aristotelian view as providing instead for a *plurality* of temporally indexed concrete worlds, each incorporating every state of affairs obtaining at the time by which it is indexed. Think of these as akin to Lewisian concrete possible worlds but with the crucial contrasts (i) that, while Lewisian trans-world travel is metaphysically impossible, we cannot help but travel unidirectionally through the Aristotelian worlds, which (ii), in contrast to Lewisian worlds, are always, from the point of view of the principle of Bivalence, incomplete. The world at $t_1$ and the world at $t_2$ are thus distinct localities at which one and the same proposition can take differing truth values, just as one and the same (contingent) proposition can take different truth-values at different Lewisian possible worlds.

Again, this adjustment does nothing to undermine the image of states of affairs 'waxing'. States of affairs show up in some worlds that were not around in earlier ones and thus may surely be said to 'wax'. What is striking, though, is there is now no scope for at least the first of the principal difficulties for relativism noted in our brisk review of Evers' discussion in the preceding section. That difficulty was: how can the relativist avoid allowing that distinct assessors in relevantly differing assessment-contexts may, by correctly endorsing mutually contradictory assessments, make contradictory demands upon the world? The evident answer for Aristotelianism, tweaked as just suggested, will be that the assessors' placement in differing assessment-contexts is now tantamount to their placement *in* different worlds and so will exactly ensure that their judgments are answerable *to* different worlds—worlds which may exactly so differ as to confer truth on both their respective claims. There is no single world on which their demands are placed.

Aristotelianism as now understood proposes, in effect, that we associate a *locality* with each time of assessment and allows that states of affairs that obtain at one locality need not—and in some cases cannot—obtain at another. Statements of invariant representational content which say nothing about specific localities (times) can thus nevertheless take differing truth-values when applied to different localities. But now: what is to stop

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11   Aristotelianism as we have understood it provides no scope for their 'waning': once erstwhile indeterminacies are settled, they remain so. Not so for the anti-realist about the past.

us drawing on this template to allow other forms of locality as well—localities of moral value, for instance, or gustatory sensibility? We may, for example, countenance the actual gustatory world *at Sara*—that is, a world comprising all the taste-evaluative facts as determined by Sara's gustatory standards—and allow that it exists simultaneously with the actual gustatory world *at John*—that is, the actual world as reflected in John's gustatory standards. The proposition that stewed boletus fungi in béchamel sauce is delicious can then be true at the one gustatory 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 of taste but a plurality of them.

The relativist may presumably think of these worlds as overlapping in all non-evaluative respects and allow that they may substantially overlap in evaluative respects too, reflecting the extent to which our tastes are shared. Still—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-conferrers for evaluative statements.

What about the second difficulty, characterized above as Evers' 'root problem'? This was the alleged tension within relativism between its 'face-value conception of the content of evaluative statements'—which seems to require that the appropriate truth-conferrers be free of any involvement of standards and assessors—and relativism's 'anthropocentric conception of their metaphysical status'—which seems to require exactly the opposite. It should be clear how a response may now run. The appropriate truth-conferring states of affairs are indeed free of any involvement of standards and assessors, and are indeed completely described by evaluative statements taken at face-value. The anthropocentricity of value is accommodated rather by the very plurality of pairwise differing evaluative worlds that differing standards ground. As far as the content of evaluative statements is concerned, there is indeed no essential difference between the relativist and the non-naturalist realist. For the latter, though, there will be presumably one and one only domain of evaluative fact, which the correct standards merely enable a thinker to recognize. The relativist's idea that variable, possibly incommensurable standards and assessments are implicated in the very being of evaluative states of affairs is accommodated, rather, by the postulated plurality of evaluative worlds, varying in tandem with the verdicts issued by the various evaluative standards of the judges when brought to bear on the non-evaluative common ground.

I do not offer any of this in a 'Eureka' spirit but merely as the outline of a form of relativism—what Carole Rovane has dubbed 'multimundialism'[12]—that, at a first pass, has the resources to straight-bat Evers' complaints. The metaphysical vision involved of a multiverse of worlds of value may impress a critic as simply an exotic way of assuming, rather than explaining, how there can be such things as relative evaluative facts. My point has been only that one kind of evaluative relativism has a metaphysical precedent in the

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12    Carol Rovane, *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Aristotelian view of temporal becoming and in Lewisian realism about possible worlds—whether the effect is any kind of mutual accreditation is something I will not pursue further here—and that, so conceived, evaluative relativism has a response to Evers' challenges. In any case, a relativist who is leery of 'multimundial' metaphysics will need to fashion a different kind of response.

## 3. Relativism and Representational Content (2)

I have suggested that we need to distinguish two quite different forms of truth-relativism. One—assessment-sensitivity, MacFarlane-style—works with a package of a ternary truth predicate for selected regions of thought and discourse, a consequent implicit distinction of those regions from non-relativistic areas of thought and talk, and a single actual world fit for description by the latter. The other—multimundialism—says nothing unorthodox about truth or content; it is, for example consistent with a correspondence account as holding across the board. But it abandons the idea of a single, comprehensive Tractarian world—a totality of all facts.

There is a major cost involved in multimundialism, at least for any relativist who retains the ambition to secure one of the principal traditional benefits of relativism: the safeguarding of a robust sense in which disagreements about a targeted subject matter—for our present purposes, disagreements about aesthetic value—can be *faultless.* Let Sara and John inhabit distinct Lewisian concrete possible worlds, one of which contains talking donkeys while the other does not. Then Sara's assertion, that there are talking donkeys, and John's, that there are not, are indeed contradictory in the specific sense that no thinker can consistently endorse both. But Sara and John do not faultlessly *disagree.* They do not disagree *at all*, any more than a pair of this-world subjects disagree who assert respectively that it is raining and that it is not when the one speaks of the weather in Edinburgh and the other of Tombouctou. It is no different with evaluative 'disagreements' when parsed as by the multimundialist relativist about value.[13] If Sara and John are each judging correctly by the light of their respective standards of taste, then though they make incompatible claims about stewed boletus fungi in béchamel sauce, they are speaking of different worlds of taste and so do not disagree.

I believe it would be an error to suppose that assessment-sensitivity relativism does better in this respect but I will not enlarge on that claim here. Let us ask rather how Evers' objections to evaluative relativism play out if we focus on assessment-sensitivity, so that for any instance, P, of a targeted range of evaluative statements, 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. Considerations that I have offered elsewhere suggest that P's possession only of ternary truth-conditions in this fashion is actually inconsistent with its possession of representational content—and hence that this variety of relativism *must* reject the representational assumption.[14] I will briefly rehearse these considerations here.

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13    Rovane is very clear that genuine disagreement is forfeit under multimundialism.

14    Crispin Wright, 'Relativism about Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts about the Very Idea', in Manuel García-Carpintero and Max Kölbel (eds), *Relative Truth* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 157–185.

We can start with a dilemma. What state of affairs might we think of an assessment-sensitive statement as representing? Well, it may be replied, no state of affairs—this is the first horn—that might be mentioned in a compendious description of the relevant circumstances of evaluation. For those matters are all, as far as they go, insufficient to settle the truth, or falsity, of P—otherwise there would be no role for a parameter of assessment in determining P's truth-value—whereas the obtaining of any state of affairs of a kind represented by P would have to suffice *tout court* for its truth. But nor—the second horn—is it open to us 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 a relational statement of that ilk will, as Evers notes, have a quite different content to that of P. In particular, where P expresses an evaluation, such a relational statement does not. And, more generally, 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.

The dilemma suggests that unless there is some other candidate type of state of affairs for P to represent, we should conclude that the ternary model of its truth-conditions excludes representationality. Maybe the reader will be content to acquiesce in this quick conclusion. But a specific kind of challenge to it needs to be addressed.

Let us focus on one paradigm of representation: that of *schematic depiction*. Surely it has to be acknowledged immediately that the question whether something successfully depicts a given object, or scenario, can be, and often is, *perspectival*—is dependent on a perspective, or point of view.[15] Consider a simple example: does this figure,



Figure 1.

better represent the object portrayed in this one?:—

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15   It is suggestive that Max Kölbel, in his *Truth without Objectivity* (London: Routledge, 2002), writing in the vanguard of the renaissance of interest in relativism, used exactly the term 'perspective' as a catch-all to denote the kind of parameters which relative truth is supposedly relative *to*.

Figure 2.

or the object portrayed in this one?:—



Figure 3.

The natural answer (accepting conventions that allow a mere line drawing to count as successfully representing a three-dimensional natural hand at all) is that Figure 1 is a better representation of the object pictured in Figure 2, since that is a human left hand, with the thumb accordingly on the right and Figure 1 thus has its 'thumb' in the correct place. By contrast, Figure 1 misrepresents the object pictured in Figure 3, for that is a right hand and, since it is pictured as palm downwards, the 'thumb' in a line drawing that represents it should accordingly be placed on the left. However this answer depends, obviously, on an assumption of perspective or point of view: specifically, the assumption that Figure 1 purports to represent either of the objects portrayed in the other figures from the same point of view as that of the other figures themselves—in other words, as viewing their objects from above, or knuckle-side to the fore. If we stipulate that the representation is to be as of

the object as viewed from below, or palm-side to the fore, then Figure 1 becomes a misrepresentation of the object portrayed in Figure 2, since it now has its 'thumb' on the wrong side, and provides instead a better representation of the object portrayed in Figure 3.

So: it does *not* go with the very idea of successful representation that it be a purely binary relation. One and the same *representans* may represent successfully, or not, depending on perspective or point of view. In parallel, it may therefore be suggested, there is no evident reason why a theorist who thinks of the truth of statements in some region of discourse as involving relativity to an assessment-parameter should thereby foreclose on their representationality either.

We can extend the example. Suppose Sara asserts that Figure 1 is a correct depiction (*modulo* the relevant line-drawing conventions) of a left hand, and John counters that it is not—that (*modulo* the same conventions) what Figure 1 correctly depicts is, rather, a right hand. This exchange has the feature, attractive for the relativist purpose, that there is a clear sense in which these claims are *incompatible*: they cannot both be accepted as correct from any single perspective or implied point of view. On the other hand, they can both be accurate when made from a suitable pair of distinct perspectives (knuckle-side and palm-side, respectively), and Sara and John, occupying those perspectives, can then both be right. What is true for Sara is one thing and what is true for John is another.

The objection to the dilemma, accordingly, is that we need to fashion our thinking about truth-relativism about propositions in accordance with the model set by this toy example. Representation can be perspectival and one and the same *representans* can successfully represent a given object or state of affairs, or fail to do so, depending on the value of a relevant parameter of perspective. Relativity to a perspective does not *per se* exclude representationality of content. So the dilemma must involve a mistake. And the mistake, it will be suggested, is made on its first horn, when it is assumed that aspects of the circumstances of evaluation cannot be represented by assessment-sensitive statements, on pain of rendering the assumption of assessment-sensitivity otiose: that any state of affairs represented by a statement should, as I put it, 'suffice *tout court* for its truth'. That assumption is tantamount to the assumption that representation is essentially binary. And that is what the toy model reminds us is false.

I believe that this line of defence of the compatibility of the ternary model of truth with the representationality of the contents to which it is applied is a muddle; specifically, that it involves a defective comparison. The defence succeeds only if we can think of the 'content' carried by a *representans* such as Figure 1 as comparable to a proposition. And we have an analogue of the sought-after idea—that of a species of proposition which is representational in content alright, but where the fact of actual representation turns on perspective, or point of view—only if we suppose that the representational content of the figure is invariant under changes in perspective or point of view. Now it is true, of course, that *something* content-like is invariant under the changing perspectives. Figure 1 does not change shape, and its lines continue to represent visual edges, and so on, even as the perspective shifts. But it is clear that what is unchanging is not representational content in the fullest sense if by that we mean: every condition that the targeted object has to meet if the *representans* is to count as accurate by the conventions relevant to the context. Suppose you are told that Figure 1 *is* an accurate representation of, say, a particular glove; what do you thereby learn

about the 'handedness' of the glove? The answer varies with perspective. If you are also told that the implied point of view is palm-down, you learn that the represented object is a left-hand glove. If you are not told that, you learn nothing about handedness. The implied point of view in such cases is accordingly in the first instance a parameter in the determination of the conditions that the represented object has to meet if the *representans* is to count as accurate in contextually relevant respects. It is thus a parameter in the determination of its *representational content* in the full sense glossed above—and only as a by-product of that is it a parameter in the determination of whether the figure does accurately represent. By contrast: assessment-sensitivity at the level of propositions sees truth-value as variable in tandem with variation in some relevant parameter *after* content has been fully fixed.

In summary. We have to acknowledge that whether something successfully pictures, or encodes, or in some other way represents something else, may depend on conventions of representation, a 'perspective', or a 'method of projection', variation in which may lead to the question of successful representation getting a varying answer. But that consideration is relevant to the matter at hand—whether assessment-sensitive statements can carry representational content—only if varying the 'method of projection' in such cases has no effect on their *content*: no effect on the demand that such a statement places on the circumstances if they are to make it true. The claim of the assessment-sensitivity theorist concerns, or ought to concern, a potential variability in truth-value *after* content has been fixed. The claim is, or ought to be, that varying the parameter of assessment affects whether a *single invariant content* is true in fixed circumstances of evaluation. No analogue of that contention is vindicated by the toy example.

## 4. The Needlessness of Relativism and the Minimalist Alternative

If ternary truth does indeed exclude representational content, there are a number of matters arising.

First, the representational assumption is indeed false for any area of discourse where an assessment-sensitive account of the truth-conditions of its signature statements is warranted. MacFarlane-style relativism, wherever justified, can thus sidestep the metaphysical challenges presented by Evers.

Second, however, any good argument for (propositional) assessment-sensitivity has to implicate grounds for denying that the contents in question are representational.[16] It is

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16  One crux for representational content is the constraint of *Cognitive Command* proposed in my *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): a constraint which a discourse satisfies just in case it is 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 there argued, Cognitive Command is a necessary condition for representationality, then one natural channel for argument for truth-relativism will be to make a case that the propositions in question fail to exert Cognitive Command. It may not be the only possible channel. However whatever argument is advanced, if informed by the ternary model, must—if ternary truth-conditions exclude representationality—somehow carry the conclusion that the discourse in question is not representational.

notable that the style of argument for assessment-sensitivity most favoured by MacFarlane in particular—that which concentrates on ostensible patterns of correction and re-traction in the discourse concerned—does not, or at least not obviously, bear any such purport. Although I cannot pursue this point further here, I believe this is a significant lacuna. MacFarlane's defence of an assessment-sensitive account of at least some of the kinds of statements for which he has argued it is appropriate—knowledge-ascriptions and epistemic 'mights' in particular—rests on the contention that it provides the best explanation of the linguistic evidence. Any best explanation, however, has first to be a *good* explanation; and, if what I have argued is correct, any good explanation will need to incorporate grounds for discounting the representationality of the contents in question.

However, there is, third, a more basic question that now becomes salient for evaluative discourse in particular. Theorists drawn to relativism about value have never rested their case on patterns of correction and retraction, or indeed on any other aspects of our actual linguistic practice. Traditional moral relativism, for instance, would be quite comfort-able with the acknowledgement that our moral discourse patterns in all respects as moral realism would predict. The urge to relativism about morals is provided, rather, by the philosophical discomfort that many are disposed to feel with moral realism—the inchoate sense that we somehow have our 'thumbs in the scales' in making moral judgements. But now, if you are drawn to an assessment-sensitive account of any type evaluative statement for these traditional kinds of reason, and if part of the obligations of such a view is argu-ment that the discourse in question is not representational in content, then in meeting that obligation you will *already* undermine the realism from which you are in recoil. If you are persuaded that moral discourse, for instance, is not representational, you already have a sufficient basis for the conclusion that there are no absolute moral facts, since if there were such facts, they would have to allow of representation by moral statements. What need, then, to claim an additional relativity in the notion of moral truth? Why would the anti-realist impulse not be fully gratified by combining (i) the reflection that moral dis-course is not representational in content with (ii) the proposal that the notion of truth that operates over it is only a deflated notion, serving to register endorsements and as a device of generalisation, just as the deflationists like to say, but marking no further dimension of contact with reality? Why the extra step of introducing ternary truth? What desirable work is it doing?

I believe the correct answer to the last question is 'None at all'. As I view matters, the central challenge posed to a philosopher who shares the relativist's suspicion of evalu-ative realism is to explain certain patterns of inequivalence that we apparently recognize in ordinary evaluative discourses between claims about what value something has and reports of our own assessment of it. There is, for example, in ordinary discourse, a dis-tinction in use between what we can call the *objectifying* idiom exemplified by 'This dish of boletus fungi in béchamel sauce is delicious' and 'The party is going to be fun' and the corresponding *subjective-relational* reports: 'This dish of boletus fungi in béchamel sauce tastes delicious *to me*', and 'I'm going to enjoy the party' or 'The party will be fun *for me*'. Moreover, it appears that the objectifying claims (*O-statements*) are in general treated as somehow stronger; witness that, in a wide class of contexts, a subjective-relational claim (*S-R statement)* provides a fall-back when an O-statement runs into difficulty. Evers asserts,

'This creamy woodland mushroom stew is delicious' but then finds that his restaurant companions are expressing mild disappointment at ordering it and falls back to, 'Well, I am enjoying it at any rate'. This kind of pattern may look superficially like an acknowledgement of a contrast between a fact of the matter and one's own impression. But if the discourse concerned is not representational, it cannot be that. What account does relativism offer of it? The relativist has the resources, of course, to *acknowledge* the contrast. O-statements, unlike (presumably) the corresponding S-R reports, will be treated by relativism as assessment-sensitive and so may match an S-R report in truth-value when originally asserted but cease to do so when assessed from a later standpoint when some material change in the parameters of assessment has taken place. But acknowledging the contrast is one thing and *explaining* it is another. What we want is insight into *why* we give currency to this form of contrast, insight into its function.

I believe that if we set relativism to one side and take merely a few steps in the direction of trying to answer that question, it will becomes apparent that there is indeed no explanatory need for a ternary truth-predicate and that a use-theoretic, rather than truth-conditional account of the assertoric contents concerned, harnessed to a minimal (deflated) truth predicate, is the more promising approach. I will conclude by taking a few such steps, focusing on the special case of discourse of basic taste. Whether or how the remarks to follow may generalize to moral, higher aesthetic, or further kinds of value, is a question for another occasion.

What are the salient connections and contrasts in use between O-statements and S-R statements?[17]

We have already noted one. S-R statements often provide a fall-back in cases where a corresponding O-statement emerges as inappropriate, or defeated. 'This ride is terrific fun!', says John to his companions on the Coney Island *Cyclone* but then, noticing their frozen, grey-faced expressions, retreats to, 'Well, I am enjoying it, anyway'. More generally, S-R statements characteristically express an *assertibility-condition* for a corresponding O-statement: the O-statement may be asserted on the basis of one's recognising in oneself an affect or response (an *S-R response*) that would verify a corresponding S-R statement.

A second point of contrast is that O-statements often carry a normative payload (of the target's *deserving* or *being suitable for*, etc., the relevant subjective affect) which a corresponding S-R statement lacks. One can find things funny which additional information may cause one to reckon are not funny at all and, when that happens, the characteristic effect of the additional information is to call into question the *fittingness* of one's original response. One's natural sense of humour may also be overridden by moral considerations. Children have to learn not only that they should not laugh at certain kinds of thing but also that they should not *find* them funny in the first place.

Does, for example, 'delicious' pattern with 'funny' in that respect? It is a nice question. Information about how pâté de foie gras is produced may properly disincline one ever to

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17   I draw in what follows on Crispin Wright and Filippo Ferrari, 'Talking with Vultures', *Mind* 126 (2007), 911–936, a critical study of Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne, *Relativism and Monadic Truth* (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

eat it—even perhaps to campaign against the cruelty involved in its production. But it is not clear that it should tend to defeat the claim that it is delicious, or to show that one should not find it delicious *if* one eats it. Mindful that different taste predicates may differ in subtle such respects, and making no claim to comprehensiveness, we can nevertheless propose a provisional taxonomy of potential defeaters for O-statements of taste that, crucially, are not also defeaters for corresponding S-R statements. It should include at least the following:

a) *Stability*: Lack of stability in one's subjective reactions across a relevantly similar range of cases may defeat an O-statement. More specifically, it may undermine the status of one's S-R response as warranting the assertion of the O-statement. Sometimes, let us suppose, you enjoy playing a not-too-serious game of Bridge and the 'craic' over the cards; other times—it is not clear why—you cannot get involved and quickly get bored. Mindful of this, you can truly report, on an appropriate occasion, that 'I am enjoying the cards tonight' but should not assert 'Bridge is fun'.

b) *Community*: A substantial lack of uptake by others often functions as a defeater for an O-statement—recall John's reaction to the dismay of his companions on the rollercoaster, and to his dinner companions' disappointment at the mushroomy main course.

c) *Robustness*: One's subjective response may be widely shared yet still defeated as a ground for an O-statement by relations of subordination among different kinds of values. The British comic magician Tommy Cooper's slithering down the stage curtain during a trick got a laugh from most of the audience until they realised that it was not part of his act but signalled that he was unwell—actually, suffering a fatal heart attack. More generally, statements about what is funny, and also about what is fun, are defeasible by moral considerations about hurt and harm. Conversely, an O-statement of disgust prompted by, say, witnessing a messy childbirth may be defeated by considerations of its sheer biological normality and the value of the end product, a new human life brought into the world.

d) *Typicality*: Certain physical or psychological conditions—for instance, intake of laughing gas or alcohol, bipolar mental illness, residues of strong toothpaste or blue cheese in one's mouth, depression, or the side-effects on one's taste buds of recent chemotherapy—are standardly treated as dependable sources of distortion, inhibition, or exaggeration of a relevant range of S-R responses and consequently as disqualifying them as grounds for a normally associated type of O-statement.

Now, it is one thing to grant that considerations in these four categories are, in actual practice, treated as potential defeaters of O-statements in circumstances where a suitable S-R statement is true—in other words, that they disqualify the occurrence of an otherwise appropriate subjective response as a ground for the assertion. It is a further thing to assume that they do so because they tend to override, or undermine, the status of that response as *evidence* for the obtaining of a state of affairs that would make the O-statement true. The further assumption is, in effect, that both the evidential connections and the

disparities in use between O-statements and corresponding S-R statements need to be recovered from *the relations between their respective truth-conditions*, between the kinds of states of affairs that are apt to make them, respectively, true. The key contention of the contrasted approach that I would recommend (to someone attracted to relativism) is that this assumption is non-compulsory. We can, and should, drop the idea that assertoric content has to go hand in hand with truth-conditional content. To be sure, assertoric content does go hand in hand with amenability to a disquotational truth predicate but it is a further step to take this to be an indicator of content fit for the representation of real-worldly states of affairs. The discrepancies in the conditions of defeat of O-statements and S-R statements should not be taken as demanding explanation in terms of a contrast in their truth-conditions.

How else then? In barest outline, the question to ask, I propose, is not: what kind of fact must O-statements be taken to describe if both their assertibility on the basis of an appropriate S-R response and their conditions of defeasibility adumbrated above are to be explained. But, rather: what point would the institution of such assertions serve—why would it be worthwhile having a practice wherein such statements were treated as assertible on the basis of S-R responses but defeasible under the kinds of conditions reviewed? And here is where it helps to be mindful that, in core cases of O-statements of personal taste, we are, after all, dealing with expressions of *value*: of things to cherish, pursue, discourage and avoid. Not all values are things that everybody cares about. Amorality, philistinism about art, and indifference to the preservation of species are, in varying degrees, not unusual. But values of personal taste are important to everybody. And we care because the S-R responses on which they are grounded are absolutely integral to our humanity and our engagement with life. A world in which we found nothing funny, or fun, or delicious, or exciting, or attractive, etc., would be a world in which it was not worth living. And a world in which our lives were dominated by negative S-R responses—of disgust, distaste, boredom, blandness and ugliness—would be a waking nightmare.

Focusing now on the positive cases, a reminder is apt of a range of mundane and contingent but very important facts about these responses.

* First, in a wide class of cases our enjoyment of values of taste, the intensity of the associated S-R responses, is characteristically enhanced by *sharing and socialisation*: the ride is more fun when others are with you and enjoying it too; we like to eat together; we—most of us, at least—prefer to go to the theatre with friends.
* Second, we do *naturally* share many of these responses.
* But, third, they are also in many cases to a high degree *tractable*—one can acquire and refine patterns of response of these kinds by experience and education.
* Fourth, many of these responses have a *rich and complex causal provenance* in their objects, which is receptive to study, technique and manufacture—to the arts of cuisine, comedy, dance and drama.
* Fifth, we do regard them as subject to conditions of *appropriateness* in the light of others of our social and personal values.

All of these factors combine to create a situation where we have an interest in having an idiom that enables us, more than merely reporting a response we personally have, to *project* it as a possible point of co-ordination, something which may be shared and thereby enhanced, is dependable rather than ephemeral, something which is a reaction of our normal, healthy selves, and free of taints of spite, *schadenfreude*, cruelty or other morally reprehensible features, and whose causal prompts it may be worthwhile understanding with a view to developing an associated art or skill of manufacture.

I am not, of course, in the slightest suggesting that ordinary speakers characteristically have such considerations in mind in making O-statements. The point is rather that we can glimpse the beginnings of how an account might run of the *social utility* of an objectifying idiom of basic taste which *both* assigns the importance it had better assign to grounding in personal responses *and* explains the broad range of defeaters we have noted without any need to conceive the contents of O-statements as representational, or as subject to assessment-sensitive truth, or (with the contextualist) to query appearances of disagreement where ordinary speakers take it to occur. As far as expressivism is concerned, it is true that this *minimalist* approach shares with the expressivist a rejection of the idea that, in making such statements, we are normally in the business of trying to report the facts; but its expressivism will now be advanced as a thesis of discourse *pragmatics*, not a claim about the semantics—the literal meanings—of the statements in question.

Among the usual antagonists in the field, the minimalist approach is, to be sure, closest to relativism. It shares with relativism two key ideas: an acceptance that basic disagreements about taste are just that—disagreements focused on exactly the shared propositional content that they seem to concern—and an anti-realist rejection of the idea that in asserting or denying such a content, one purports, or should be taken to purport, to represent an objective fact. Crucially, though, its anti-realism is exhausted by the non-representationality thesis and generates no need for relativistic manoeuvrings with the truth predicate.

It has been, in my view, a major weakness of almost all the recent and contemporary writing about these issues that this minimalist, Wittgensteinian, use-theoretic orientation has been invisible to most of the protagonists, relativists and anti-relativists alike.[18]

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