

There is No Such Thing as Relative Truth

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Abstract

I argue that it is misleading, and confused, to frame the now familiar contextualism vs. relativism debate in terms of truth. The issues raised in these debates do not concern the nature of truth, or the semantics of the truth-predicate or -operator, but rather the nature of our aesthetic evaluations, the logic of epistemic possibility, and the character of normative requirements. Phrasing these questions in terms of the (non-)relativity of truth is unnecessary: semantic descent is called for. This, I argue further, is fortunate, because the very notion of relative truth does not make sense: if it appears that some thing is true only relative to something else, then it is not really true and what is really true is really something else. The ‘additional factors’ some relativists claim to have discovered truth to depend on, such as standards of taste, practical interests, states of knowledge etc. are unfit to play their presumed role of determining the truth of propositions not about them. There is not, and could not be, any such thing as relative truth.

I will here be exclusively concerned with relativist theories that hold that the truth-value of primary truth-bearers depends (and is in this sense “relative to”) to things over and above (and thus at least not “included” in) so-called “circumstances of evaluation”, the worldly counterparts of the fully specified truth-conditions of their content.¹ The content may itself be ‘relativistic’ in the sense of being not entirely descriptive, but ‘anchored’ in a time, an individual or a place,² and the circumstance of evaluation may not be fully determined by the sentence-type, but may vary with features of the utterance context, or even the mental states of the speaker³ The determination of content by utterance context does not have to be by specifiable rules, as advocates of “free enrichment” stress (Travis 1997; Wilson & Sperber 2002; Carston 2002; Récanati 2004). What is important, however, is that the circumstance of evaluation is determined by the total situation at the time of utterance: the properties the utterance and its context have at that time will then settle its truth-value for a given circumstance of evaluation.⁴ The question of truth-relativism, as I understand it, is whether this truth-value is itself ‘relative’ to or ‘dependent’ on any further factors, such as, e.g., a context of assessment, a standard of taste, a perspective or an epistemic state.

I thus exclude two types of relativism from consideration: ontological relativism, that ascribes variations in truth-value unaccounted for by context to the perspectival nature of the circumstances of evaluation, and content relativism, that ascribes it to the content of the truthbearer. While ontological relativism is a very unorthodox view, it is more difficult to clearly distinguish genuine truth-relativism from content-relativism. A consideration of the temporal case may be of help here, which is why I discuss the analogy with temporalism in sect. 4.

1. This matches well the way relativism about utterance truth is presented in standard text-books on the topic: Kölbel (2008: 4) speaks of “novel truth-determining factors”

2. I thus exclude from the relativist camp those who take the possible worlds that serve as circumstances of evaluation to be ‘centred’: Chalmers (2002), Stalnaker (2001) (file) More on this below.

3. I thus also exclude from consideration forms of relativism such as Recanati’s “moderate relativism” and MacFarlane’s “non-indexical contextualism”. For more details of and motivation for nonindexical contextualism see MacFarlane (2007), Recanati (2007), Kölbel (2002). More on ‘content relativism’ below.

4. This does not mean that they determine a unique truth value: it may well be that the content determined is ‘relativistic’ in one of the senses discussed below.

Before doing so, I would like to get clearer about the core claim of truth relativism (sct. 1), discuss the way it is set up to answer “Evans’ challenge” (sct. 2) and then present it with a dilemma: if we understand the additional index on the model of the world-index, then relative truth is representation, “truth according to”, i.e. not a type of truth at all (sct. 3); if we understand it on the model of the time-index, on the other hand (sct. 4), then it does not properly speaking modify or relativise truth at all, but rather ‘modulates’ the content; on this model, truth-relativism collapses into content relativism, which is, I will further argue (sct. 5) a form of ontological relativism, where the relative things, i.e. things that have different aspects, are contents. Because such a detour through contents is unnecessary and , I conclude,

1 The claim of truth relativism

The meaning of “It is raining”, according to [Perry \(1986\)](#), is a propositional function that gives different truth-values for different circumstances of evaluation. The relevant circumstance of evaluation is fixed by features of the utterance context (and thus Perry’s temporalism is not a kind of relativism in our sense of the term), but there is a layer of content – the *lekton*, “that which is meant” ([Mates 1953: 11](#)) – with respect to which we may truly say that it is true at some circumstances but not others and it is on this content that temporal operators operate ([Kaplan 1989: 502](#)).

Though we are not required to take these contents to “contain time-variables” (as [Mates \(1953: 36\)](#) interprets Diodorus Cronus) and may instead take the variability to be of the truth-value of the “same complete meaning” ([Geach 1955: 144](#)), these meanings will be about the times at which they are correctly evaluated for truth, at least in the sense of XX In this sense of aboutness, the sentence is as much about its unarticulated as it is about its articulated constituents ([Perry 1986: 141](#)). Essentially tensed propositions are about the times at which they are evaluated, and their temporality is thus a built-in feature.

Truth relativism is importantly different: it claims that “the content of ‘is true’ is not given by a function from worlds to sets of propositions but instead yields such functions only relative to parameter values (standards of taste for example)” ([Cappelen / Hawthorne 2011: 460](#)). But what role do such parameters play? MacFarlane is surprisingly bland about this:

The realist will say that the accuracy of an assertion that something is tasty is independent of anyone’s standard of taste, while the relativist will say that it depends on the standard of taste relevant at the context of assessment. [...] Though we have employed a relational notion of truth in our formal semantics, this notion is defined in terms of monadic truth. We can even restate our condition for the accuracy of an assertion in terms of monadic truth: an assertion that *p* is accurate, as assessed by *a* at *c*, just in case, by *a*’s standards of taste at *c*, *p* is true. ([MacFarlane 2011: 446](#))

What role does the operator “by *a*’s standards of taste at *c*, *p*” play?

[Kölbel \(2008: 4\)](#), for instance, frames the issue of relativism as the question “whether there are novel truth-determining factors, such as standards of taste and states of knowledge, and how exactly such a determination relation should be construed”.

question whether an utterance being true or ‘accurate’ involves its standing in some relation to a context of assessment (cf. in particular [MacFarlane \(2011: 446\)](#) and [Cappelen & Hawthorne \(2011: 459\)](#)).

To say that the substantial issues may be postponed by taking (provisionally, at least) a standard of taste to be “a function from pairs of propositions and possible worlds to truth-values” ([Kölbel 2008: 17](#), cf. also [2002: 100](#)), is to miss this important point.

MacFarlane disagrees with this characterisation of relativism:

A natural first thought is that a monadic property is not *fundamentally* monadic if things have it only in virtue of standing in certain relations to other things. [...] ...on this interpretation T1 [“There are propositions and they instantiate the fundamental monadic properties of truth *simpliciter* and falsity *simpliciter*”] would be inconsistent not just with relativism, but with most substantive theories of truth, including correspondence theories. (MacFarlane 2011: 442)

He also rejects another characterisation in terms of the explanatory priority of the monadic truth predicate over its polyadic cousins. Instead, he takes relativism to be the testable hypothesis that a certain class of predictions about assertions and beliefs should allow them to vary with the context from which they are assessed. Somewhat surprisingly, the predictions do not concern the varying assertions and beliefs directly, but rather what speakers believe about them: the predictions are those “we make about when speakers will take themselves to be warranted in making assertions, when they will feel normative pressure to retract earlier assertions, and when they will take themselves to be in disagreement” (MacFarlane 2011: 444). MacFarlane (2011: 445) then phrases the question in terms of his own, ternary truth-predicate he calls “accuracy”:

To decide whether the proposition is assessment-sensitive, we [...] have to know what the theory says about the relation between accuracy (relative to a context of assessment) and truth-at- X [where X is a factor with which the truth of the proposition varies]. [...] ...various answers are possible:

realist An assertion of p at c_0 is accurate, as assessed from c_1 , just in case p is true at X^* , where X^* is “the one true value of X ”.

contextualist An assertion of p at c_0 is accurate, as assessed from c_1 , just in case p is true at X_{c_0} , where X_{c_0} is the value of X relevant at c_0 .

relativist An assertion of p at c_0 is accurate, as assessed from c_1 , just in case p is true at X_{c_1} , where X_{c_1} is the value of X relevant at c_1 .

By thus decoupling relativism from the denial of the explanatory priority of monadic truth, MacFarlane turns it into a first-order view:

The realist will say that the accuracy of an assertion that something is tasty is independent of anyone’s standard of taste, while the relativist will say that it depends on the standard of taste relevant at the context of assessment. [...] Though we have employed a relational notion of truth in our formal semantics, this notion is defined in terms of monadic truth. We can even restate our condition for the accuracy of an assertion in terms of monadic truth: an assertion that p is accurate, as assessed by a at c , just in case, by a ’s standards of taste at c , p is true. (MacFarlane 2011: 446)

MacFarlane’s discussion of these issues confuses a monadic property with a monadic predicate. [...] Roughly speaking, a monadic property either does or doesn’t stand in the instantiation relation to a given object. (Cappelen & Hawthorne 2011: 459)

For relativists, the content of ‘is true’ is not given by a function from worlds to sets of propositions but instead yields such functions only relative to parameter values (standards of taste for example). (Cappelen & Hawthorne 2011: 460)

Evans’ challenge

This misses the point of Evans’ challenge – it was, in my view, not (or at least: not just) about coming up with a norm for assertion in which the monadic truth-predicate does not essentially feature, but rather to

tell us *how the world is taken to be* by an utterance which is only relatively true. To this question, as far as I see, there is no good answer.

Here is another way of asking what I believe to be the same question: Relativists can claim explanatory power for their notion of relative truth only to the extent it makes distinctions that the non-relativised truth-predicate does not. With respect to any one such distinction, however, we may legitimately ask *why* it is there – what *makes* such an utterance relatively true? This question is legitimate because the mere existence of an extra argument place does not yet guarantee that arguments that fill it do not occur vacuously: relative truth might just be coextensional with truth. This is the same contrast as between a-temporal and omni-temporal predication: just the fact that something is predicated *relative* or *with respect to* a time does not yet by itself guarantee temporal variation: we need an argument that the extra parameter makes (or, at least: could make) a difference. And for this we need to know more about the nature of this parameter. Before examining two models canvassed in the literature – assimilating the relativising parameter either to a temporal or to a modal index – I will in this section show how the worry just formulated lies behind what has become known as “Evans’ challenge”.

World-relativity of truth

It is useful to compare truth-from-a-perspective to truth-at-a-world in this respect. Neither is a *kind* of truth; they both rather involve the notion of representation, and are a species of truth-according-to-some-view-of-the-matter. A proposition is true-at-*w*, if it would be true if *w* were actual; a proposition is true-by-*a*’s-standards-of-taste-at-*c* if *a*, in *c* takes it to be true.

If standards of taste are representations of things as more or less tasteful, and as tasting such and such, then they are unfit for truth to be relativised to them. In the same way merely possible worlds represent things differently from how they really are, perspectives are perspectives *on* something existing independently of them. Standards of taste that are representations of the tastes of things cannot explain why taste ascriptions are only relatively true – rather they presuppose such taste ascriptions, because they consist of them.

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