Response to Almér's Questions

I shall concentrate on the questions Alexander Almér raises in §5 of his paper. His questions concern the notion of proposition or content I employ in some recent work (Kölbel 2003a, 2003b and 2004). This notion is meant to allow that the same content of assertion, belief etc. vary in truth value with a parameter I call "perspective". In this response, I shall first summarise the motivation that leads me to propose contents with relativised truth-values. In the second and longest section, I shall address what seems to me to be the most important issue raised by Almér's questions, namely the question of whether anything analogous to a T-theorem is acceptable in the framework I propose and what significance this has for attributions of content. In the third section, I very briefly address Almér's questions concerning logical relations. In the fourth and final section, I briefly answer the charge that arose during the conference that there is no sufficient theoretical pay-off for relativising propositional truth to perspectives.

1. It will be useful very briefly to summarise the motivation that leads me to propose contents with relative truth values. My starting point is the intuition that there is a difference between objective and non-objective contents of thought and speech. Objective contents of thought command agreement in the following sense: it is a priori that if one person believes such a content and another person believes the negation of that content, then one of the two is making some kind of mistake. In other words: one cannot disagree faultlessly on an objective matter. Non-objective contents of thought, by contrast, are those on which faultless disagreement can at least not be ruled out a priori. This criterion for objectivity is inspired by Crispin Wright's notion of "Cognitive Command" (Wright 1992). The intuitive idea is supposed to be that we cannot and do not rule out the possibility that two people disagreeing about, e.g., whether sardines are tasty, are both entirely free from error.

It is very difficult, however, to make room for faultless disagreement within a standard logico-semantic framework. For one can derive quickly that when there is a disagreement, i.e. when one person believes a proposition *p* and another person believes the proposition that not-*p*, then one party is indeed committing an error, for at least one party is believing a proposition that is not true.[1]

Some may conclude, from this type of argument, that in fact there cannot be faultless disagreement in the sense defined. If the possibility of faultless disagreement, thus understood, is to be our criterion of non-objectivity then we are forced to conclude that everything is objective. Proponents of such a response must then look for ways in which to explain the impression we had that there were cases of faultless disagreement.[2] However, I have elsewhere argued in favour of preserving the intuition that there are areas of thought that admit of faultless disagreement.[3] This, it seems to me, requires a

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[1] For a detailed review of several versions of this argument, and a systematic review of possible responses to it, see my 2003. For an earlier discussion, see Wright 2001. See also Alexander Almér's useful summary in his section 4.

[2] I have discussed and criticised various such options in my 2002, 2003a and 2004.

[3] Saying that an area of though admits of faultless disagreement does not entail that all disagreements in that area are faultless, but merely that in that area the presence of disagreement by itself does not justify the conclusion that a mistake was made.

modification of standard semantics, namely that of relativising the truth of propositions or contents of utterance.

The general idea is this: two principles can be made jointly responsible for the conclusion that faultless disagreement is impossible: the normative principle that it is a mistake to believe a content that is not true, and the principle that the truth of the content of an utterance is absolute, i.e. does not vary with any parameters.

(T)   It is a mistake to believe a content if it is not true.

(Abs)   The truth of contents of utterance is absolute.

I believe it is very difficult to deny (T) outright[4] However, it is not so hard to question the assumption of the absoluteness of truth. So I propose to deny (Abs), to relativise truth to perspectives, and to reformulate (T) as follows:

(TR)   It is a mistake to believe a content that is not true according to one's own perspective.

What are perspectives? —Formally, perspectives are just functions from contents to truth-values. They assign truth-values to propositions (objective ones and non-objective ones alike) in a consistent way, e.g. if one proposition receives the value "true" then that proposition's negation does not also receive the value "true". Thus formally, perspectives are very similar to possible worlds, and no-one happy with the formal aspects of possible worlds should reject the formal aspects of perspectives. However, the theoretically substantial notion is that of perspective possession to which (TR) makes reference. The intuitive idea can be illustrated with an example: I can erroneously believe that sardines are tasty, e.g. I believe they are tasty but discover, upon trying some, that I was wrong. I was wrong because eating (a typical sample of) sardines causes me an unpleasant sensation (perhaps even disgust) and it is a condition for the correctness of such judgements that I do not respond in such a way. This condition is an a priori rule governing the concept of tastiness. There are rules governing the correct employment of all concepts.[5] Now, the relationship of perspective possession is constrained by all these rules, and by (TR). In other words, perspective possession is the relation such that it relates each thinker with the perspective that classifies as true all those contents it is correct for him to believe and as false all those contents it is incorrect for him to believe, where "correct" and "incorrect" here means correct or incorrect according to the various conceptual norms governing the concepts that can occur as constituents in propositions.[6] Thus, the relationship of perspective possession is based on, and a mere formal model of, the more basic a priori rules of judgement. In this relativised framework, it is coherent to say that there can be one thinker believing a content and another thinker believing the negation of that content, but no mistake whatsoever.

2. Alexander Almér formulates a series of desiderata that a notion of content must satisfy in order to make room for the possibility of faultless disagreement in the way I have

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[4] Note that (T) can be expressed, though less elegantly, without mentioning truth: Instances of the following schema are true: "It is a mistake to believe that *p* if not-*p*."

[5] See my contribution to this volume for some more details.

[6] There may not be a unique perspective meeting this condition. A stricter formulation could thus be effected by talking of the set of perspectives that comply with the condition.

proposed. In particular, he asks how his constraint 8 (p. 23) can be met without violating constraint 7. This seems to me to point towards an important worry. I shall first re-state the problem in my own terms and then indicate briefly how it can be answered.

I take Almér's constraint 8 to mount the following challenge: what is the truth-condition associated with the propositions whose truth-values are relative to perspectives? How are these truth-conditions stated? He suggests that the relevant T-theorems should *not* have something like the following form (where "P1" denotes one particular perspective):

(1)   The sentence "sardines are tasty", when uttered in perspective P1 is true iff sardines are tasty according to P1.

which perhaps follows from a generalised theorem:

(2)   For all perspectives p: the sentence "sardines are tasty", when uttered in perspective p, is true iff sardines are tasty according to p.

According to Almér, the reason why neither (1) nor (2) is an appropriate T-theorem for "sardines are tasty" (or of the propositions expressed by it), is that this would violate the requirement that cases of faultless disagreement are genuine cases of disagreement, i.e. cases where one party believes a proposition and another party believes the negation *of that proposition*. For on this view, the apparently disagreeing parties would each be expressing a proposition about their own perspective, thus they would not be genuinely disagreeing.

Almér's observation is correct. If claims similar to (1) or (2) "gave" the meanings, or "truth-conditions" of sentences or utterances, then that would suggest that perspective relativity is a form of indexicality.[7] It would amount to what I have elsewhere called "revisionism" or "indexical relativism" (2002 and 2003a, 2004 respectively). The idea would be this. The sentence "I am hungry." is context-sensitive and expresses different propositions in different contexts of utterance, depending on the speaker and the time of the utterance.[8] The sentence type just provides a function from contexts of utterance to propositions. For each combination of a speaker and time, this function has a different proposition as value. The context of utterance provides the speaker and the time which together with the sentence type determine the proposition expressed. Similarly, an indexical relativist might think, the sentence "sardines are tasty" expresses different propositions in different contexts of utterance, depending on the perspective. In this case, the context provides a perspective, just as in the previous case the context provided a speaker and a time. As a result, the sentence "sardines are tasty" expresses one proposition when used in one context of utterance and a different proposition when used in a different context of utterance, namely one in which the "perspective" provided is different. As with all indexicality, perspective-relativity would disappear once the sentence-type is placed in a context of utterance. The contents of utterances are no longer relative.

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[7] See my 2001 for a detailed discussion of the Davidsonian doctrine that meanings are "given" (not stated) in the target theorems of a meaning theory, and also for references to the literature on this problem.

[8] In a Davidsonian framework, this might be expressed via conditionalized T-sentences roughly of this form: For all u, a, t: if u is an utterance of "I am hungry" made by a at time t, then u is true iff a is hungry at t.

But perspective is not just another contextual parameter like time, place etc. A context of utterance does not determine a perspective. Rather, the idea is that the content expressed by the sentence "sardines are tasty" in a given context of utterance varies in truth-value from perspective to perspective. Thus it may be correct for one person to believe this very same content while not correct for another.

Now, Almér might want to know how, if not in the style of (1) and (2), the "truth-conditional meaning" of a non-objective sentence can be given. I am myself no friend of the misleading Davidsonian slogan "meaning is truth-conditions" and the corresponding talk of T-theorems that "give" meanings.[9] Nevertheless, the question arises whether my proposal of relativising the truth of propositions is compatible with truth-conditional semantics, i.e. whether T-theorems of some form are compatible with the idea that there can be genuinely faultless disagreement. In short, my answer to this question is "yes": T-theorems of a relativised form can be formulated, but while they can be viewed as revealing a truth-condition of sorts, they should not be viewed as revealing meaning or content in a straightforward way.

Let's return to the sentence "Sardines are tasty." as an example. Let's assume that this sentence is in no way indexical, i.e. that it is a case of a sentence that expresses the same content in all contexts of utterance. Suppose further that we are trying to state a semantics for an object language OL containing this sentence, but in such a way that faultless disagreement is not ruled out. We are stating the semantics in a metalanguage ML. Then the ML truth-predicate employed in the semantics should be relativised to perspectives. Thus the following would be (the analogue of) a T-theorem (I am writing "true2" in order to mark the two-place truth-predicate employed here from the one-place truth-predicate employed below):[10]

(A)   For all perspectives p: "Sardines are tasty" is true2 in relation to p iff sardines are tasty according to p.

This generalised, relativised T-theorem has instances: call Alexander's perspective P1, then this is a consequence of (S):

(A1)   "Sardines are tasty." is true2 in relation to P1 iff sardines are tasty according to P1.

However, the right hand side of (A1) does not, as some might think, express the content, the proposition, or "the truth-condition" of any utterances of the sentence. It is *not* like the following case:

(B)   For all speakers a and times t: "I am hungry" is true3 as uttered at t by a iff a is hungry at t.

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[9] See my 2001.

[10] The Davidsonian treatment of context-sensitive sentences is either with conditionalised T-theorems (Higginbotham) or relativised ones (Davidson). My proposed treatment of non-indexical non-objective sentences involves something analogous to relativised T-theorems, but could not involve something analogous to conditionalised T-theorems, for conditionalised T-theorems employ a one-place-truth-predicate (as in footnote 8) which applies to utterances, while on my proposal even utterances cannot be attributed an absolute truth-value. This can be taken as further proof that the relativisation of truth I propose cannot be viewed as a form of indexicality.

(B1)   "I am hungry" is true3 as uttered 18/11/2004 1pm by Alexander Almér iff Alexander Almér is hungry 18/11/2004 at 1pm.

(B), and (B1) may be seen as conveying the contents of (propositions expressed by) utterances of the sentence, e.g. the content that Alexander Almér is hungry 18/11/2004 at 1pm. This is because speaker and time are contextual parameters. However, nothing analogous happens in the case of (A) and (A1), because "perspective" is not a contextual parameter. The whole point of relativising truth to perspectives was that *even* at the level of utterances, *even* at the level of the proposition/content believed, truth is relative to perspective.

Another way of expressing the same point is this: The right hand side of (A1) cannot, as a whole, count as expressing the content of the sentence "Sardines are tasty" because the right hand side of (A1) is explicitly de-relativised. The ML sentence "sardines are tasty according to P1" has a constant truth-value for all perspectives, while the OL sentence "sardines are tasty" varies in truth-value from one perspective to another. Thus clearly, the RHS is not the translation of the sentence mentioned on the LHS. (A1) *in some sense* gives the relativised truth-condition of the sentence "Sardines are tasty", but it does not give its meaning or content in any straightforward sense.

How, then, should a truth-conditional semantic theory be formulated? I can see two options. Option (a): the theory generates theorems like (A) and then contains a rule that allows us to infer from (A) that "sardines are tasty" expresses the content that sardines are tasty. We can then say that judging this content will be a mistake for those who have a perspective in which that content is not true2, and that people with distinct perspectives might disagree on that content without any of them committing a mistake.

Option (b): the semantic theory proceeds by generating theorems of the standard form

(C)   "Sardines are tasty." is true1 iff sardines are tasty.

and again allows the derivation that the sentence expresses the content that sardines are tasty. In either case, the proposal to relativise the truth of propositions only kicks into action when the work of semantics is done, e.g. when we ask ourselves whether one of the contents expressed by two disagreeing parties must be mistaken.

A possible disadvantage of (b) is that it uses a one-place truth-predicate which will allow us to infer that of any two disputants, one believes a content that is not true1. This may not be bad: "true1" is merely disquotational and if a proposition *p* is such that it has different truth2-values in different perspectives, then the proposition that it is true1 that *p* will also have different truth2-values in different perspectives. Thus, as long as we only employ a one-place disquotational truth-predicate, we are forced to conclude that no disagreement is faultless. We are, as it were, forced to judge things from within our own perspective, and from within our own perspective, disagreements are never faultless. However, introducing the two-place predicate true2 permits us to step back and assess the situation from a neutral standpoint, and to say that one and the same content may be true in relation to one perspective and not true in relation to another.

In either case, making room for faultless disagreement requires us to introduce into ML the resources to address non-objective issues in objective terms. It is an objective

question whether the content that sardines are tasty is true2 relative to someone's perspective. It is a non-objective question whether sardines are tasty. By discussing the former and not the latter, we are able to reflect on whether people are mistaken or not from a neutral point of observation. It makes sense that we should take this neutral stance because we are theorising generally about the contents of judgement, the norms governing judgement and the question of what constitutes making a mistake. Whether a mistake has been committed by a thinker (given the normative rules governing the concepts that the thinker is using) is an objective issue.

Thus to come back to Almér's challenge: relativised T-theorems like (A) can (on option (a)) be taken to "give" the meaning or content of utterances of the sentence in question, however, the rule that takes one from (A) to the content will be different from the rule that takes us from (B) to the content of utterances of an indexical sentence. In other words, (A) can be accepted without accepting indexical relativism.

3. I would like briefly to address Almér's more concrete question about logical relations among contents. Under what conditions, for example, do two contents contradict one another? In my framwork, logical relations generally can be defined in no less problematic a way than in any framework of classical logic. Syntactic definitions remain the same. Standard semantic definitions can easily be adjusted be generalising over all perspectives. For example, suppose that a standard semantic definition of contradictoriness says that a set of contents is contradictory if and only if not all members of the set can be true. Then contradictoriness can be defined in my framwork by simply saying that a set of contents is contradictory just if there cannot be a perspective in relation to which all members of the set are true.

4. Finally, I wanted to address a worry that arose during the discussion at the conference. It was suggested by some participants that the introduction of propositions or contents with relative truth values was in some way illegitimate or ad hoc because the mere desideratum of saving the phenomenon of faultless disagreement did not provide sufficient motivation. The suggestion was that propositions or contents with absolute truth-values had already "earned their keep" in a huge variety of ways, and that a contents with relative truth-values needed to earn their keep in a similar way.

This objection is welcome in that it treats contents or propositions as what they are: theoretical entities whose legitimacy or otherwise depends entirely on the success of theories that employ them. However, it is also based on a false suggestion and an unfair demand. On the one hand, it suggests that "merely allowing faultless disagreement" cannot justify questioning an old semantic assumption with Fregean pedigree. This is quite false. If relativising propositional truth is an adequate way of saving the phenomenon of faultless disagreement, and there are no clearly better ways of doing the same, then this alone provides sufficient justification. For none of the explanatory merits of propositions or contents with absolute truth-values are lost upon introducing the relativisation. The demand that relativised propositions must earn their keep just as propositions with absolute truth-values already have is unfair: propositions with relative truth-values still do the things propositions with absolute truth-values did.

A similar worry arose about the perspectives and the relation of perspective possession postulated in my framework. Possible worlds, it was said, are a legitimate

postulate because they help explain semantically why certain modal inferences are valid. However, I believe that the situation is very similar for worlds and perspectives. In each case, a specific phenomenon of language is explained by modifying a simple semantic theory based on classical logic.

Thus, I do not accept the exaggerated demand that a relativisation of truth to perspectives must earn its keep by being useful in the explanation of several independent phenomena. Nevertheless, I believe that it meets the exaggerated demand without needing to. Recently, a number of other theorists have proposed a relativisation of truth at the level of utterances or propositions for entirely different reasons. Thus, John MacFarlane (2003) rejects the absoluteness of utterance truth in order to make room for objective indeterminism. MacFarlane (2004), as well as Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson (2004), argue that the semantics of epistemic modals requires a relativisation of truth. Gibbard (1990), arguably, proposes a similar relativisation when he formulates a semantics in terms of "factual-normative worlds". There are further examples. Thus it is by no means true that preserving the possibility of faultless disagreement is the only reason for challenging the orthodoxy that the truth of propositions and utterances is absolute.

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