

## *Three easy points on relative truth*

**Abstract** - As a contribution to the debate on the intelligibility of the notion of relative truth, I discuss three issues that are of some interest in the way of bush-beating. They are (1) whether relative truth can be explicated as truth in a subjective world, (2) whether alleged relative truth could just be belief (i.e., “ $p$  is true for  $X$ ” = “ $X$  believes that  $p$ ”), and, finally (3) whether plain truth could, or should be defined on the basis of relative truth. The first two questions receive a negative answer, while the third is seen to depend on further decisions on the nature of relative truth, though one particular attempt at articulating the relation between plain and relative truth (Kölbel 2002) is shown to be unconvincing.

### **1. Preliminaries: Moderate relativism, faultless disagreement, ‘true for X’.**

Here, I will use the phrase ‘moderate relativism’ as it is used by Crispin Wright (2008), i.e. to describe the view on which relativistic accounts of the truth conditions of propositions are appropriate for some propositions, though not for every proposition as in radical, or global, or universal relativism (Wright 2008).<sup>1</sup> We say that a semantic account is relativistic (as distinct from a contextualistic account) if the truth value of a contextually complete propositional content is made to depend not just on a possible world, but on an extra parameter as well, the extra parameter being intuitively interpreted as a perspective (Kölbel 2002), or a judge (Lasersohn 2005), or a point of assessment (MacFarlane 2005). As radical relativism is widely believed to be shot through with unsurmountable difficulties (see e.g. Boghossian 2006), nowadays philosophers of a relativistic bent incline to the more defensible moderate variety.

The view that relativistic semantics applies to certain classes of propositions (though not to all) has been supported by the widespread intuition that simple, “monadic” truth (Cappelen & Hawthorne 2009) is not at home in some domains of discourse: for example, judgments of taste cannot plausibly be said to be unqualifiedly right or wrong, and the propositions they express are not plausibly regarded as simply true or simply false, as there appear to be no “facts of the matter” to decide issues of taste. If Ann asserts

(1) (*Ann*) Korean cabbage is delicious,

while Bill retorts:

(2) (*Bill*) No, it's not: it's disgusting,

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Moderate relativism' is used differently both in Recanati (2007) and in Lopez de Sà (2008).

their disagreement (for they do disagree, or so the relativistic intuition goes) does not entail that either Ann or Bill must be wrong as either assertion must be false. Their disagreement is *faultless* (Kölbel 2002): they may be both right, in a sense. Relativistic accounts of the truth conditions of the propositions expressed by judgments of taste are meant to capture the "sense" in which they may be both right.

Moderate relativism is committed to the possibility of faultless disagreement. For suppose every disagreement were faulty, i.e. suppose that in every case of disagreement, at least one party must be wrong. If, as seems natural, we identify making an assertion that is wrong with asserting a (simply) false proposition, then if such were the case relativism (moderate or not) would be unmotivated: we wouldn't need a notion like relative truth to make sense of exchanges like (1)-(2). Simple truth and falsity would do. If on the other hand every case of disagreement were faultless, then radical, not moderate relativism would be motivated as the best explanation: for in such a case (under the same assumptions) no propositional content could ever be regarded as simply false. Again, if apparent cases of faultless disagreement were not cases of disagreement (i.e., both parties' assertions can be plainly true) then relativism -moderate or radical- would be unmotivated. Moderate relativism is motivated only if

- there are genuine cases of faultless disagreement, and
- not every case of disagreement is faultless.

Moderate relativists explicate the "sense" in which Ann and Bill are both right by claiming that both of their assertions are true, though relatively so: it is true *for Ann* that Korean cabbage is delicious, while it is true *for Bill* that it is disgusting (hence, not delicious). Both Ann and Bill are right in the sense that the content Ann asserts is true (for her), and the incompatible content that Bill asserts is also true (for him). However, the notion of relative truth, or truth-for, that is thereby introduced is not unproblematic. Not that we do not often *say* such things as "It is true for Ann that Korean cabbage is delicious", or, perhaps even more frequently, "For Ann, it is true that Korean cabbage is delicious". The issue is, first, what we mean by such statements, and, secondly, on the hypothesis that (in some cases at least) what we mean involves the notion of truth-for, what truth-for *is* exactly and how does it relate to plain, monadic truth. John McFarlane put the latter issue very well in one of his seminal papers on relative truth:

...it is not clear that the concept of truth *admits* of relativisation to assessors. If 'true' as it occurs in 'true for X' is just the ordinary, non-relative truth predicate, then it is unclear what 'for X' adds, unless it is just 'and X believes this'. On the other hand, if the occurrence of 'true' in 'true for X' is like the 'cat' in 'cattle', then the relativist needs to explain what 'true for X' means and what it has to do with truth, as ordinarily conceived (2005: 328).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For another statement of the *prima facie* implausibility of the very notion of relative truth see Richard 2004: 226, 230.

In this paper, I will take up three side issues that are, however, of some interest in the way of bush-beating. They are (1) whether relative truth can be explicated in terms of subjective worlds, (2) whether alleged relative truth could just be belief (i.e., “*p* is true for *X*” = “*X* believes that *p*”), and, finally (3) whether plain truth could, or should be defined on the basis of relative truth.

## 2. First point: Relative truth as truth in subjective worlds.

We have no trouble understanding what it is for a *sentence* to be true or false at some value of some parameter. For example, it is not hard to understand what is meant by saying that the sentence 'I am lazy' may be true at one index and false at another. It may be explicated by pointing out that *different facts* make the sentence true depending on the context in which it is used - more particularly, depending on who is uttering it. If one doesn't like facts, it may also be explicated by pointing out that *different inferences* may be sustained by different uses of that same sentence. The basic, relatively clear intuition is that the content I express by uttering 'I am lazy' is different from the content you express by uttering 'I am lazy'

With relativity of a *proposition's* truth value to an extra parameter (judge, point of evaluation, etc.) things are not equally straightforward. For example, it seems that here we could not say that the proposition sustains different inferences, depending on the parameter's value: the inferential potential of *Korean cabbage is delicious* appears to be the same no matter who is evaluating it (which is as it should be, for inferential potential depends on content, but content is supposed to be unaffected by the extra parameter). A contextualist might object that the inferential potential of <Korean cabbage is delicious<sub>Ann</sub>> is not the same as the potential of <Korean cabbage is delicious<sub>Bill</sub>> as (e.g.) the former but not the latter implies that Ann likes Korean cabbage. However, the proposition(s) whose potential the contextualist is assessing is not the same as the one the moderate relativist is considering; variation in inferential potential does not depend on who *evaluates* the proposition.

Could we say that the proposition is made true by different facts? Crispin Wright has considered the hypothesis that we could:

We might for example permit the actual world *at Williamson* — that is the actual world as reflected in Timothy Williamson's gustatory standards — to exist simultaneously with the actual world *at Wright*, that is, the actual world as reflected in Crispin Wright's gustatory standards. The proposition that stewed rhubarb is delicious can then be true at the one aesthetic location, so to say, and untrue at the other[...]. No need, in this case, to resort to a context of assessment parameter in order to accommodate the truth-relativist impulse – truth can be old-fashioned truth-at-a-world,

*simpliciter*. The relativism surfaces, rather, in the thought that there is no single actual world but a plurality of them. (2008:172).

The idea is that we might countenance *subjective worlds*: a subjective world is the actual world as distorted by someone's standards – standards of taste, in our case, or, in other cases, aesthetic or epistemic standards. The same proposition will be said to be true –plainly true, not relatively true- at one subjective world but not at another. This, it is suggested, is one way we could make sense of relative truth: for a content to be true *at X* is for it to be (simply) true at some X-distorted world. As with the relativity of a sentence's truth value, different facts make one and the same content true, depending on whose standards we are considering: except that here the relevant facts belong to different subjective worlds.

Several objections can be raised against this view as a way of making sense of relative truth. Let us start with an objection that, though inaccurately put, does point to a genuine difficulty. Annalisa Coliva and Sebastiano Moruzzi (unpublished) have argued that on the "subjective worlds" view alleged cases of faultless disagreement would not be cases of disagreement; hence, the view is unacceptable to the moderate relativist. They say:

If P and not-P are true in different worlds, in what way could their respective supporters be in disagreement with each other? For, in order to have disagreement...they should maintain that they are both true in the same world.

Now, that two assertions *p*, *q* are true at different worlds surely does not entail that the asserters cannot be in disagreement with each other. Suppose Williamson asserts that Aconcagua is more than 7000m tall, while Wright asserts that Aconcagua is not more than 7000m tall. Their assertions are made true by different worlds (Williamson's by the actual world among others, Wright's by some other possible world), yet they obviously disagree with each other. The reason we say they disagree is that we take their assertions to be about the same world, i.e. the actual world, and they cannot both be true in the same world. We would say they do not disagree if their assertions were *taken to be about* different worlds, not just true in different worlds.

One way we would take their assertions to be about different worlds would be by reading them as containing an implicit "subjectivity" operator: e.g. we might take Williamson's assertion to amount to "*In my world*, stewed rhubarb is delicious", and similarly for Wright's assertion (call this "the subjective reading" of assertions of taste). Such a reading would be a variety of contextualist reading: it would introduce a contextual parameter, saturation of which generates compatible contents. Contents would be compatible in that they can both be true in the same world, as is usually the case with contextualist readings: for example, that Korean cabbage is delicious *according to Ann's taste* is compatible with its being disgusting *according to Bill's taste*, as both

may be actually the case. In our case, assuming that it is true in the actual world that in X's world stewed rhubarb is delicious if and only if it is (simply) true, in X's subjective world, that stewed rhubarb is delicious,<sup>3</sup> it would follow that the content of Williamson's assertion is compatible with the content of Wright's assertion, as both can be true in the actual world. As Coliva and Moruzzi noticed, disagreement evaporates.

Obviously, a moderate relativist would reject the subjective reading (as she would reject all contextualist readings of assertions of taste) exactly because it makes disagreement disappear. According to the moderate relativist, this is enough to show that the subjective reading misinterprets Williamson's and Wright's assertions. Is there some other way in which the moderate relativist can avail himself of Wright's subjective worlds? Surely he could not say that the assertion that stewed rhubarb is delicious is true for Williamson (or "at" Williamson) if and only if Williamson's subjective world  $w_T$  *coincides* with the actual world  $w^*$  (at least) in the fact that stewed rhubarb is delicious, i.e. that  $w^*$  belongs to the existence set of <Stewed rhubarb is delicious>.<sup>4</sup> For that would amount to the actual existence of the fact that stewed rhubarb is delicious: so on the one hand, the appeal to subjective worlds would be redundant; on the other, the relativist would be retracting his constitutive claim that "there are no facts of the matter" as to whether, say, stewed rhubarb is delicious (see Kölbel 2002, p.19; Lasersohn 2005, p.644; Wright 2006, p.52). For the (allegedly relative) truth of the assertion that stewed rhubarb is delicious would entail that it is an actual fact that it is. Any disagreement with the assertion would then be bound to be faulty.

A more promising way for the relativist to avail himself of subjective worlds would start by saying that though assertions of taste are *not* intended to be about subjective worlds, they are to be *evaluated* at subjective worlds: Williamson's assertion that stewed rhubarb is delicious is true (for Williamson) iff it is simply true at  $w_T$ . One could then choose between leaving the notion of simple truth at  $w^*$  undefined for such assertions, and defining a notion of *subjective* truth at  $w^*$  to the effect that  $p$  is subjectively true (at  $w^*$ ) iff there is a subjective distortion of  $w^*$ ,  $w_X$ , such that  $p$  is simply true at  $w_X$ . Assertions of taste, among others, could never be simply true at  $w^*$ , only subjectively true. It seems to me that this would be the use of subjective worlds that best corresponds to Wright's suggestion. To be sure, it was part of the suggestion that "there is no single actual world": if the relativist wants to stick to it, he will choose the first option and leave simple truth at  $w^*$  undefined for assertions of taste (etc.). Alternatively, the relativist might pick up another part of Wright's suggestion (Williamson's subjective world "is *the actual world* as reflected in Timothy Williamson's gustatory standards", my it.) and grant that there is an actual world, though no

---

<sup>3</sup> Reading the implicit operator 'in my world' as both modal and indexical.

<sup>4</sup> Mulligan & Correia 2007: 9.

assertions of taste are simply true at it - only subjectively true, i.e. true in some subjective distortion of it. This framework may be seen as accounting for disagreement, in that there is no world at which both contents (Williamson's and Wright's) are simply true. Neither content is simply true at the actual world, as on both options simple truth at the actual world is not defined for contents of that kind; moreover, they cannot be both simply true at any subjective world, if subjective worlds are assumed to be consistent. If <stewed rhubarb is delicious> is true at Williamson's world  $w_T$  then <stewed rhubarb is disgusting> is not true at  $w_T$ .

However, even the more promising framework is not without difficulties. First of all, it can be argued that it does not seriously account for disagreement. Plausibly, Williamson and Wright disagree about whether stewed rhubarb is delicious or disgusting. Now, in the actual world stewed rhubarb does not possess the property of being delicious: if it did, Williamson would be right and his disagreement with Wright would not be faultless. Stewed rhubarb is delicious (or disgusting) only in subjective worlds. Hence, there is nothing in the actual world for Williamson and Wright to disagree about; more precisely, their disagreement is not about whether a property that could be instantiated by stewed rhubarb is actually instantiated by it. Yet, this is exactly what their disagreement appears to be about. That the contents they express by their assertions are incompatible (i.e., there is no world at which they are both true) does not illuminate the nature of their disagreement.

The second difficulty concerns the inherent plausibility of subjective worlds as ontological constructions. On most views, worlds consist of facts (Mulligan & Correia 2007: 9): if there are subjective worlds, then there are subjective facts. Facts, in turn, are usually regarded as *correctness* conditions for judgments, assertions, and beliefs:

if  $x$  judges correctly that  $p$ , then the state of affairs that  $p$  obtains. And if this is plausible, so too is the further claim that if  $x$  judges correctly that  $p$ , then  $x$  judges correctly that  $p$  because the state of affairs that  $p$  obtains. Facts make judgments correct. (ib.: 6).

Thus the subjective fact (of  $w_T$ ) that stewed rhubarb is delicious makes Williamson's assertion correct. Now, suppose this is the case for each and every assertion of taste that Williamson makes: no matter what assertion Williamson makes in matters of taste, there is a fact in  $w_T$  that makes it correct. If such were the case, Williamson's subjective world  $w_T$  would be like a mirror of his assertions of taste. But then, the claim that facts are correctness *conditions* would be in question: for it seems to be part of the very idea of a correctness condition that it may fail to hold, thereby making an assertion *incorrect*. This is part of the intuitive idea of the *resistance* of facts: facts are

there to possibly belie our judgments, assertions, and beliefs. If subjective facts do not possess this capacity then they are funny facts indeed (and subjective worlds are funny worlds).

But perhaps we don't need to assume that subjective worlds are mirrors of a subject's assertions of taste. Among relativists, Max Kölbel (2008) has claimed that it is possible for someone to have false beliefs about her tastes. For example, Ann may believe that whale meat is not tasty, whereas in fact whale meat is tasty for her (perhaps she never actually tried whale meat but, somehow, she came to acquire the belief that it is disgusting). If Kölbel is right, Ann might sincerely assert that whale meat is not tasty while it is a fact of her subjective world that it *is* tasty. On this assumption, subjective facts would genuinely play the role of correctness conditions for assertions of taste.

As we shall see below (§3), Kölbel's suggestion may be based on a naturalistic (mis)interpretation of what it is for something to be tasty (disgusting, funny..) *for* a subject: an interpretation that a relativist should really reject, for it has the consequence of making disagreement in matters of taste faulty rather than faultless. But suppose for a moment that the hypothesis is relativistically acceptable. Subjective facts do not simply mirror assertions of taste: one can go wrong about one's tastes. That Williamson sincerely asserts that stewed rhubarb is delicious does not guarantee that his assertion is true in  $w_T$ , as  $w_T$  may or may not contain the fact that stewed rhubarb is delicious, depending on what Williamson's tastes *really* are:  $w_T$  might well contain the fact that stewed rhubarb is disgusting. Even so, there is a difficulty.

Let us reflect on what determines the facts that constitute a subject S's subjective world  $w_S$ .  $w_S$  is supposed to reflect S's standards of taste: it is a fact that  $p$  in  $w_S$  if and only if, on S's standards,  $p$ . It is essential to realize that whether or not it is a fact that  $p$  in  $w_S$  does *not* depend on any facts about S other than his standards of assessment; e.g. it does not depend on S's physiology or on the causal effects that something -e.g. some kind of food- may have on it (even though, of course, S's assessment, and even S's standards may be partly influenced by both physiology and causal effects). For if the fact that  $p$  depended on such factors then it would be a fact in the *actual* world as well, so that S's possible disagreement with S' as to  $p$  could not be faultless.

This being so, it seems that, once more, subjective facts are somewhat *sui generis*. For on the one hand, as  $p$  is a fact (albeit subjective), we have that

(3) If it is correct (on S's standards) that  $p$ , then it is correct that  $p$  because it is a fact (of  $w_S$ ) that  $p$ .

But on the other hand

(4) If it is a fact (of  $w_S$ ) that  $p$ , then it is a fact (of  $w_S$ ) that  $p$  because it is correct (on S's standards) that  $p$ .

One may of course have legitimate doubts about both occurrences of 'because', in (3) as well as in (4). However, the occurrence in (3) is motivated by minimal truth making, "the widespread intuition that truth [as well as correctness] is truth *in virtue of* something" (Mulligan 2006: 34). As to the occurrence in (4), why should we assume that it is a fact of Williamson's subjective world  $w_T$  that stewed rhubarb is delicious, were it not for the fact that stewed rhubarb *is* delicious according to his standards? It may be objected that this is merely our reason for assuming that such a fact exists in  $w_T$ , not the cause of its existence. However, in both (3) and (4) 'because' may be explanatory without being causal.

Now, that (3) and (4) both hold will not do: "instances of '*p* because *p*' are all false";<sup>5</sup> particularly, explanations cannot go both ways. This difficulty expresses what can be seen as the essential problem with subjective facts: on the one hand, they are there to make assertions of taste true (though subjectively so); but on the other hand, they are a mere reflection of a subject's standards and judgments of taste. It seems unlikely that one entity can do both jobs.

### 3. Second point: Relative truth and belief.

When trying to make sense of the notion of relative truth, or truth-for, one easily falls prey to the temptation of taking relative truth to be just *belief*: i.e., saying that a proposition *p* is true for X amounts to saying that X believes that *p*. One rather obvious reason for yielding to the temptation is the following. At least *prima facie*, moderate relativists seem to regard a subject A's assertion that *p* as sufficient ground for the semantic statement "*p* is true for A". Clearly, this sets relative truth apart from plain truth, as we do not regard a subject's sincere assertion that *p* as sufficient ground for the semantic statement "*p* is true" (it is a fact of life that asserters are often mistaken). On the other hand, a subject's sincere assertion that *p* is usually regarded as sufficient ground for attributing her the *belief* that *p*. In this respect, and in spite of superficial appearance, "*p* is true for X" turns out to be closer to "X believes that *p*" than to "*p* is true".

Aside from that, the belief paraphrase seems to capture certain common, though admittedly vague relativistic intuitions: after all, many instinctive relativists appear to think that in some domains of discourse such as judgments of taste and aesthetic judgments there are no genuine truths, only opinions.<sup>6</sup> With some effort, the intuition could be extended to knowledge ascriptions ("It is true for X that Y knows that *p*" = "Given X's beliefs, Y knows that *p*").

---

<sup>5</sup> Mulligan 2006: 32.

<sup>6</sup> Such vague intuitions are reported by Lasersohn 2005, p.643, among others.

However, at least some moderate relativists have no use for such a paraphrase. Among them, Max Kölbel has been particularly explicit and persistent in rejecting it (Kölbel 2002: 33-34, 2008: 19, 2009: 393-94). His argument is that a proposition  $p$  might be true for a subject  $X$  even though her beliefs are incompatible with  $p$ , or  $X$  has no beliefs at all concerning  $p$ . For example:

It seems entirely coherent to say [WM] ‘John has no view as to whether whale meat is tasty. But in fact whale meat is tasty for him.’ (2009: 393-4).

But on the belief interpretation of ‘true for’, [WM] would be incoherent. Or again:

People ... sometimes believe or assert propositions that are not true according to their own standard. For example, Barbara may come to believe, as a result of listening to Anna’s utterance [“Depp is more handsome than Pitt”], that Depp is more handsome than Pitt. She might later realize that this belief is a mistake, because she prefers Pitt. (Kölbel 2008: 19, fn.30).

We may suppose that was already the case at the time  $t$  Barbara believed that Depp was more handsome than Pitt: i.e., at  $t$  she believed that Depp was more handsome than Pitt, while it was true for her (at  $t$ ) that Pitt was more handsome than Depp. On the belief paraphrase of ‘true for’, she would have entertained inconsistent beliefs.

Now, there is little doubt that we do say such things as "John has no view as to whether whale meat is tasty. But in fact whale meat is tasty for him" without perceiving any inconsistency. But the reason may be one the moderate relativist wouldn’t approve of: we might be interpreting “Whale meat is tasty for him” on the pattern of -say- "Gluten is toxic for her", i.e. as asserting that a certain natural relation, *being tasty for*, holds between whale meat and John. Now, perhaps "tasty (for  $x$ )" is occasionally taken to stand for some such natural, wholly objective relation: on this reading, that something is tasty for someone is entirely objective, as objective as a substance's toxicity for a given organism. However, if “tasty” had this kind of semantics there would be no room for a relativistic account of "x is tasty". If "tasty" stood for a natural relation between a substance (such as whale meat) and a person, the assertion that whale meat is tasty would necessarily be elliptic for the assertion that whale meat is tasty for \_: there would be no content <whale meat is tasty> to be evaluated by a judge or from a perspective. Moreover, the (completed) assertion that whale meat is tasty for John would state that whale meat has a certain objective effect on John, not that whale meat has the property of tastiness as evaluated from John's perspective, or taking John as the judge, etc. Similarly, exchanges such as (1)-(2) would not lend themselves to a

relativistic treatment. They would involve no disagreement, as both (1) and (2) ought to be read contextually and could be both true (or both false, as the case may be).

I am not claiming that examples such as [WM] *must* be given the "naturalistic" reading if they are to be regarded as consistent; there may be other possibilities. However, the suspicion is strong that the consistent reading of [WM] may depend on a naturalistic reading of "tasty". Hence, a moderate relativist had better not rest his case against the belief paraphrase on this kind of examples.

Anyway, there is a stronger argument against the paraphrase. As John MacFarlane remarked some time ago (2005: 328), there are constraints on what 'true for' can be taken to mean within the framework of moderate relativism. Let us be reminded that moderate relativists countenance *both* simply true propositions *and* propositions that can only be said to be true *for* some point of view (judge, etc.), though not for some other. Given this assumption, could relative truth be a subspecies of simple truth, i.e. could "*p* is true for X" mean "*p* is (simply) true & P(X, *p*)"? It seems not; for in such a case, every relative truth would be a simple truth as well, so that its *not* being a truth for someone, Y, could only be brought back to some deficiency on Y's side. This would make Y's disagreement faulty, rather than faultless, thereby voiding the moderate relativist's motivation. If on the other hand *every* relative truth is universally relative (if *p* is true for X, there is no Y such that *p* is not true for Y), then again there are no instances of faultless *disagreement* (as there are no cases of disagreement): the same conclusion follows.

Call the requirement that relative truth is not a subspecies of truth "the Autonomy requirement". According to Autonomy, not *every* relative truth is a simple truth as well. Could it be that *some* are, i.e. could there be a relative truth *p* that is also a simple truth, or must the extensions of relative truth and simple truth be disjoint? We shall later see that some relativists countenance the former possibility. However, I believe they should accept a weaker requirement: there cannot be propositions that are *both* simply true *and* "essentially controversial", i.e. true relatively to X but not true relatively to Y (for some X and Y). If such were the case for some proposition *p*, then, as *p* is simply true, its not being true for Y could only derive from some inadequacy of Y, as in the previous case: *faultless* disagreement would not arise (hence *p* couldn't be true relatively to X, contrary to the hypothesis). Call this "the (Weak) Disjoint Extensions requirement". Autonomy does not entail WDE, as on Autonomy there might be *some* propositions that are both simply true, true for X, and not true for Y. Strictly, neither does WDE entail Autonomy. Suppose Autonomy does not hold, so that 'p is true for X' amounts to 'p is simply true & Q(p)' (for some Q), hence every relatively true proposition is simply true as well; nonetheless, it could still be the case that no such proposition is also not true for Y (for some Y), namely, if no relatively true proposition were

controversial. In that case, however, relativism would be unmotivated. So we could say that WDE entails Autonomy (and is stronger than Autonomy) on condition that at least one relatively true proposition is controversial.

Now, let us consider again the belief paraphrase, “ $p$  is true for  $X$ ” = “ $X$  believes that  $p$ ”. Clearly it does not violate Autonomy, as it does not entail that every relatively true proposition is simply true as well. But, on the other hand, it violates WDE, for the following reason. The moderate relativist admits that there are propositions that are simply true. Let  $p$  be one such proposition, e.g. a tautology or an arithmetical truth. It is plausible to assume that for any such truth  $p$ , there may be someone who does not believe that  $p$ . Maybe she does not understand it, or perhaps she just fails to see the point. On the other hand, there will be lots of other people who do believe that  $p$ . Hence, on the belief paraphrase, for any such simply true  $p$ ,  $p$  will be true relatively to  $X$  (for many  $X$ ) and not true relatively to  $Y$ : WDE is violated. This finally condemns the belief paraphrase.

But if relative truth cannot be understood in terms of belief, how can we otherwise motivate the relativist’s basing the semantic statement “It is true for Ann that Korean cabbage is delicious” on Ann’s assertion “Korean cabbage is delicious”? In fact, we do not need any such motivation, for the relativist’s semantic judgments can be seen in a different light. The relativist need not conceive of semantic statements such as (5)

(5) It is true for Ann that Korean cabbage is delicious

as entailed by sincere assertions; he may see them -and relativist semantics in general - as providing *the best explanation* of certain intuitive features of exchanges like (1)-(2), namely of their being cases of faultless disagreement.<sup>7</sup> If we assume that judgments of taste have a relativistic semantics, we can see how Ann and Bill can disagree without either being at fault. Ann's sincere assertion (1) may in itself provide only a *prima facie* reason for the semantic statement (5): depending on how relative truth is conceived, it may well turn out that, though Ann sincerely asserts that Korean cabbage is delicious and believes as much, it is *not* true *for* her that it is. In other words, that Ann's assertion of (1) is a *prima facie* ground for (5) does not commit the relativist to a notion of relative truth on which Ann's assertion of (1) automatically makes (5) true.

#### 4. Third point: Simple truth as universally relative truth.

---

<sup>7</sup> This is in agreement with Crispin Wright’s (2006: 42) suggestion that relativism is best seen as a *theoretical attempt* to make sense of the properties (=faultless disagreement) that exchanges such as (1)-(2) are ordinarily attributed.

WDE is the requirement that for no proposition  $p$ ,  $p$  is both simply true *and* true relative to X (for some X) and not true relative to Y (for some Y). Should the relativist also accept a stronger constraint, i.e. that for no  $p$ ,  $p$  is both simply true *and* true relative to X (for some X)? Call this the “Strong Disjoint Extensions” requirement (SDE). Considering the moderate relativist's general attitude, SDE makes sense: for his view seems to be that there are propositions, such as those expressed by judgments of taste etc., to which the notion of simple truth just doesn't apply (they are not the kind of contents that *could* be simply true or simply false), whereas other propositions -  $\langle 7 + 5 = 13 \rangle$ , say - are just true or, as in this case, just false. As I already pointed out, most contemporary relativists seem to agree that relativistic semantics is in order for some contents though not for others: "the relativist views in contemporary debate are typically local" (Wright 2008: 167-168). Thus Lasersohn restricts relativism to sentences involving "subjective" predicates, i.e. predicates that generate disagreement that cannot be decided by objective facts (2005: 682-3); and Richard takes relativism to apply to expressions that are subject to "accommodation and negotiation" (2004: 228). As relativist semantics only applies to certain linguistically individuated contents, it follows that other contents are regarded as standard in point of truth, i.e. simply true or simply false. Within this frame of mind, a proposition is *either* the kind of content that is simply true or simply false, *or* the kind of content that can only be true *for* someone though possibly not *for* someone else. No proposition can belong to both kinds. Simple truth is not conceived as "truth in every perspective", i.e. as universally relative truth: the notion of relative truth just does not apply to ordinary, non-subjective contents.

With respect to this consensus, Max Kölbel stands apart: he takes relative truth as basic and defines a notion of *objective* truth on the basis of relative truth (objective truth is "necessarily universal" relative truth). It follows that the notion of relative truth does apply to contents that are objectively true. Kölbel first defines objectivity (2002: 102):

(OBJ) For all  $p$ :  $p$  is objective iff it is not possible that there be thinkers  $A$  and  $B$ , such that  $p$  is true in  $A$ 's perspective and  $p$  is not true in  $B$ 's perspective.

A proposition is then said to be *objectively true* iff it is both objective and true for some X (hence for every X); it is objectively false iff it is both objective and false for some (hence for every) X. Thus, objectively true propositions are true for some X -i.e., relatively true- as well.

Is objective truth a reasonable *explicatum* of simple truth?<sup>8</sup> It does play one role of simple truth: if a proposition is objective (objectively true or objectively false), then any disagreement on it

---

<sup>8</sup> In Kölbel's terminology it clearly isn't, as he reserves the phrase 'simple truth' for the *relative* notion (ib.).

is bound to be faulty. Moreover, there is some *prima facie* plausibility in the view that simple truth is just truth *for* everyone. However, Kölbel's objectively true propositions are not just relatively true propositions that *happen* to be true for everyone. There is no inconsistency in holding that all perspectives might happen to agree on some content, though it is a content inherently suitable for perspectival truth: for example, it might so happen that Barolo is an excellent wine in all perspectives. If so, Barolo would be universally perspectivally excellent. However, Kölbel's objective truth is not *accidentally* universal relative truth: an objectively true proposition is objective, i.e. it is such that it is a priori that, if it is true for some X, then it is true for every X. That "it is not possible that there be thinkers *A* and *B*, such that *p* is true in *A*'s perspective and *p* is not true in *B*'s perspective", Kölbel explains, means that "it is ruled out by a priori constraints on language use" that *p* might be true for *A* but not for *B* (2002: 139, fn 15). In other words, objective contents are singled out by the linguistic features of sentences that express them. Here Kölbel seems to agree with the consensus: contents to which simple truth and simple falsity apply are distinct from "inherently controversial" contents - contents that might be true for X but not for Y. But then -one wonders- what is the point of applying the notion of relative truth to contents that could not possibly be true for one but not for another? The notion of accidentally universal relative truth does make sense: any number of debaters may turn out to agree on an inherently controversial content. Barolo may turn out to be good for everyone (though, in principle, someone might disagree). However, it is not equally clear that the notion of *necessarily* universal relative truth makes sense. If *p* is inherently incapable of generating faultless disagreement because of the kind of content it is (as determined by a priori constraints on language use), why should we want to say that, nevertheless, it is true *for* X (or false for X) rather than simply true, or false? In moderate relativism of all varieties (including Kölbel's), relativist semantics is motivated by faultless disagreement: where faultless disagreement is a priori ruled out, application of the notion of relative truth is unmotivated.

### **References**

- Boghossian, P. (2006) *Fear of Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Cappelen, H., Hawthorne, J. (2009) *Relativism and Monadic Truth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Coliva, A., Moruzzi, J. (2010) "Is There a Coherent Notion of Relativism?", unpublished paper.
- Kölbel, M. (2002) *Truth without Objectivity*, London, Routledge.
- Kölbel, M. (2008) "Introduction: Motivations for Relativism", in M. Garcia Carpintero, M. Kölbel (eds.), *Relative Truth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.1-38.

- Kölbel, M. (2009) "The Evidence for Relativism", *Synthese* 166, pp.375-395.
- Laserson, P. (2005) "Context Dependence, Disagreement and Predicates of Personal Taste", *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28, pp.643-686.
- Lopez de Sà, D. (2008) "Presuppositions of Commonality: an Indexical Relativist Account of Disagreement", in Kölbel & Carpintero (eds.) 2008, pp. 297-310.
- MacFarlane, J. (2005) "Making Sense of Relative Truth", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105, pp. 321-339.
- MacFarlane, J. (2007) "Relativism and Disagreement", *Philosophical Studies* 132, pp.17-31.
- Mulligan, K. (2006) "Facts, Formal Objects and Ontology", in A. Bottani, R. Davies (eds.), *Modes of Existence*, Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt, pp.31-46.
- Mulligan, K. , Correia, F. (2007) "Facts", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/facts/>).
- Recanati, F. (2007) *Perspectival Thought: A Plea for Moderate Relativism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Richard, M. (2004) "Contextualism and Relativism", *Philosophical Studies* 119, pp.215-242.
- Wright, C. (2006) "Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism and Rhubarb", in P. Greenough, M.P.Lynch (eds.), *Truth and Realism*, Oxford University Press, pp.38-60.
- Wright, C. (2008) "Relativism about Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts about the Very Idea", in Kölbel & Carpintero (eds.) 2008, pp.157-185.