

RELATIVISM ABOUT TRUTH AND PERSPECTIVE-NEUTRAL PROPOSITIONS

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According to relativism about truth, there are certain kinds of sentences such that the propositions expressed by their utterances cannot be correctly determined as true or false relative to possible worlds only. In particular, the truth values of propositions about taste (i.e., those expressed by the utterances of sentences about taste) are supposed to be determined relative to possible world and perspective couples. What is important is that the proposition expressed involves no reference to perspective; as a result, the perspective that is to be used in the truth value assignment is not identified by the proposition expressed. Notwithstanding its considerable appeal in various respects, relativism about truth faces certain fundamental problems raised in this paper. It is claimed, firstly, that relativism about truth can hardly comply with our understanding of the predicates of taste in a satisfactory manner. Secondly, relativism about truth does not explain how it is possible that the propositions expressed, despite involving no reference to perspective whatsoever, are to be evaluated as true or false relative to some perspective or other. Thirdly, it is left unexplained how the right kind of perspective is to be selected provided there is no reference to perspective in the proposition expressed.

Keywords: Circumstance of evaluation – Perspective – Perspective-neutral proposition – Predicate of taste – Relativism about truth – Sentence about taste

1. Perspective. *Relativism about truth* (henceforth, *relativism* for short) maintains that there are specific kinds of sentences such that the truth values of their utterances cannot be correctly determined relative to the *standard circumstances of evaluation*.¹ For the sake of simplicity, I assume (i) that it is propositions themselves rather than anything else that are *primary* bearers of truth values,² and (ii) that the standard circumstances of evaluation involve just possible worlds.³ So, relativism has it that there are specific kinds

¹ The term 'relativism about truth' is MacFarlane's (cf. MacFarlane 2005). MacFarlane designates by it his specific kind of relativism. My usage of the term is broader; it covers the whole range of theories classed as *truth-perspectivalist* by J. Schaffer in his illuminating review of available approaches (cf. Schaffer 2011).

² Utterances of sentences are, thus, secondary bearers of truth value, i.e. an utterance of a sentence is true/false only provided it expresses a proposition that is true/false.

³ The standard Kaplanesque semantics (as well as other versions of the standard semantics) identifies circumstances of evaluation with possible world and time couples (cf. Kaplan 1989). The temporal parameter is suppressed throughout the whole paper.

of sentences such that the truth values of the propositions expressed by their utterances cannot be determined solely relative to possible worlds.

The following sentences (1) – (3) are typical examples the relativist presents to support her contention:

- (1) Horror movies are scary.
- (2) Spinach is tasty.
- (3) All jokes about blondes are funny.

Assuming that their utterances express the propositions (1P) – (3P), respectively, it would be impossible to determine whether they are true/false provided possible worlds are the only “truth relativizers”:

- (1P) *that horror movies are scary*
- (2P) *that spinach is tasty*
- (3P) *that all jokes about blondes are funny*

For example, since it can hardly be clear what it means for the horror movies to instantiate the property of *being scary* (without any relativization), it is impossible to say how a possible world should look like for (1P) to be true at the world. Rather, the horror movies are scary *for one person* and not scary *for another person*; they instantiate the property of *being scary* only relative to someone for whom they are scary. Consequently, we should turn away from the standard notion of the circumstances of evaluation. The truth value of (1P) (and other propositions of this kind) should be relativized to something else.

The relativist offers a simple solution: The truth values of the propositions such as (1P) – (3P) should be made relative to *non-standard circumstances of evaluation*. They should be pictured as couples consisting of possible worlds and other parameters which can be labelled *perspectives*. The term ‘perspective’ is used here as a generic term applied to whatever kind of entities can be selected as non-standard parameters of circumstances of evaluation. According to some relativists, the perspective can be identified with the *judge* (determined by the context of utterance) (*cf.*, for example, Lasersohn 2005). The judge (of the context of utterance) is an individual who assesses objects (and other kinds of entities) as scary, tasty, funny, etc. According to some other relativists, the perspective can be identified with somewhat less specific kinds of entities such as culinary standards of taste, aesthetic standards of beauty, psychological senses of humour or psychological standards of scariness (*cf.*, for example, MacFarlane 2005; Kölbel 2009).

The relativist’s approach can be applied to a wide range of sentences. It might be inevitable in the case of sentences about aesthetic values, certain psychological effects (fear, etc.) or gustatory qualities, etc. Since these kinds of sentences invoke various kinds of taste, I label them *sentences about taste*; the propositions expressed by utterances of such sentences are called *propositions about taste*; and the predicates such as ‘is scary’ or ‘is beautiful’ are referred to as *predicates of taste*. However, relativism finds its application in other cases as well. In particular, it finds prominent application in epistemic discourse. For example, concerning the sentences about knowledge attributions it is claimed that the proposition expressed by an utterance of such a sentence is true/false relative to a possible world and certain *standards of knowledge* used to determine whether an agent knows or

does not; or, concerning the sentences featuring epistemic modals it is claimed that the proposition expressed by an utterance of such a sentence is true/false relative to a possible world and certain *state of knowledge* an agent has at her disposal.⁴ Despite such a wide range of applications, I am going to discuss relativism merely in connection with the sentences about taste.

2. Relativism vs. Standard Semantics. No doubt, the perspective plays a prominent role in the truth value assignment to certain kinds of utterances. Since the standard semantics has no room for non-standard circumstances of evaluation, there is only one way how to do justice to the specific nature of the sentences about taste: An utterance of such a sentence could be properly evaluated at the standard circumstances of evaluation just in case the proposition it expresses involved reference to the relevant perspective as its constituent. As a result, the utterances of (1) – (3), rather than expressing the propositions (1P) – (3P), respectively, could be viewed as expressing the following kinds of proposition:

(1P*) *that horror movies are scary according to the standards of fear SF*

(2P*) *that spinach is tasty according to the standards of taste ST*

(3P*) *that all jokes about blondes are funny according to the sense of humour SH*

Let us assume that ‘the standards of fear SF’ refers to particular standards of fear pertaining to a particular person; similarly for ‘the standards of taste ST’ and ‘the sense of humour SH’. The constituents *according to the standards of fear SF*, *according to the standards of taste ST*, and *according to the sense of humour SH* remain unarticulated in (1P*) – (3P*).⁵ They refer to such perspectives relative to which it is assessed whether the horror movies are scary or spinach is tasty or all jokes about blondes are funny, respectively. Let us stipulate that the propositions such as (1P*) – (3P*) are *perspective-specific* and that the propositions such as (1P) – (3P) are *perspective-neutral*.

It is easy to see that the propositions (1P*) – (3P*) are true/false at the standard circumstances of evaluation. To simplify things a bit, the propositions (1P*) – (3P*) consist of a certain relation and two further entities of different kinds; they are true (false) if (and only if) the pair consisting of the two entities exemplifies (does not exemplify) the relation in question at a given possible world. To put it rather simplistically, (1P*), for example, consists of the relation of *being scary according to*, the set of horror movies and certain standards of fear; it is true (false) at a given possible worlds provided the pair consist-

⁴ For a much more detailed review of possible applications of relativism see Kölbel (2008).

⁵ According to some theoreticians we should distinguish two kinds of unarticulated constituents; *cf.*, e.g., Recanati (2002). In both cases, a constituent is unarticulated provided there is no syntactic representation of it *at the level of the surface structure* of the sentence. In one case, however, a constituent can be articulated at another level of the syntactic structure; in particular, it might correspond to a syntactic item appearing at the level of the logical form, though being “invisible” on the surface structure. Such a constituent is unarticulated in a *weak* sense. A constituent is unarticulated in the *strong* sense provided there is no syntactic representation of it at *any* syntactic level, including the logical form. We may remain neutral about which kind of unarticulated constituents appears in the propositions (1P*) – (3P*).

ing of the set and the standards exemplifies (does not exemplify) the relation of *being scary according to* at that world.⁶

When we compare the two approaches to the sentences about taste, the relativist's one seems pretty straightforward. She does not need to invoke unarticulated constituents. On the other hand, she seems more ontologically generous because she makes room for the properties such as *being scary* or *being tasty*, etc. The standard semanticist has to deny that there are properties of this sort because her intensional approach explicates properties as functions assigning sets of objects to possible worlds. The standard semanticist has to assume that there are binary relations of *being scary according to* or *being tasty for/according to*, etc. instead of the above properties.⁷

The main issue between the two approaches can be summed up into the question: Do we really need a room for perspective-neutral propositions about taste? Or can we get along only with perspective-specific propositions about taste in their stead? The relativist replies with "Yes" to the former question and with "No" to the latter question; the standard semanticist claims the exact opposite.

The main argument for relativism claims that the standard semantics cannot explain disagreements about taste. Disagreement about taste is usually conceived as a simple and widespread phenomenon well-known from everyday communication. However, the standard semantics seems to come across insurmountable problems here. Consider a short exchange:

(4) Ann: Horror movies are scary.

Ben: No, horror movies are not scary.

According to the relativist, Ann's utterance expresses the proposition *that horror movies are scary*. Obviously, Ben disagrees with Ann because his utterance contradicts her proposition; he expresses the content *that it is not the case that horror movies are scary*. The standard semanticist, however, cannot provide such a neat explanation: Ann's utterance should express a perspective-specific proposition such as the proposition *that horror movies are scary from Ann's perspective*. Ben, in order to disagree with what Ann has said, should be taken as expressing the proposition *that it is not the case that horror movies are scary from Ann's perspective*. Though not inconceivable, this is not what usually happens when two parties disagree with one another. When disagreeing with Ann, Ben

⁶ Sadly, despite its crucial role in the relativistic semantics, the notion of the standards of taste remains undefined in the relevant literature. For our purposes it suffices to say that the standards of taste can be represented as certain functions from persons to sets of entities. For example, the culinary standards of taste ST ascribe, to a certain person X, the set of entities X finds tasty; the aesthetic standards of beauty SB ascribe, to a certain person Y, the set of entities Y finds beautiful; the sense of humour SH ascribes, to a certain person Z, the set of entities Z finds funny; etc.

⁷ It is permitted that the second argument of the relation of *being scary according to* (etc.) is a bound variable rather than particular standards. We may have the proposition, for example, *that there are standards of fear such that the horror movies are scary according to them*. In the case of truth values assignments to such a proposition, we need not consider *particular* standards of fear. For the sake of simplicity, I put these cases aside in the rest of the paper.

assessed horror movies as scary or not from *his* own perspective; thus, his utterance expresses the proposition *that it is not the case that horror movies are scary from Ben's perspective*. But we can see that any trace of disagreement between Ann and Ben eludes us in this explanation. The standard semanticist has to concede that the above dispute is just a case of misunderstanding rather than disagreement proper. However, we have to make room for the possibility that their disagreement is genuine.

One possible reply to the relativist is that she simply exaggerates the importance of disagreements about taste. In fact, genuine disagreements about taste need not be as widespread as the relativist imagines. As Tamina Stephenson has pointed out, the exchanges such as (4) “are just the kind of arguments that are often pointed out to be futile” (Stephenson 2007, 493). Perhaps, what we need to do is to explain the mere *appearance* that exchanges such as (4) involve disagreement. This is, however, an extra-semantic matter and we need not adjust our semantic theories to conform to it. Anyway, it is not my aim here to assess whether this kind of evidence is sound. I want to raise more general considerations pointing to some lacunae in the relativistic approach. I claim that the relativist owes us plausible responses to certain fundamental questions to be raised in what follows.

3. Understanding the Predicates of Taste. A simple observation motivates the first problem for relativism. As far as I can see, it is essential to our proper understanding of what the predicates of taste mean that they can be correctly applied to objects, events or other suitable kinds of entities *only* relative to some perspective or other.⁸ No one could be permitted to understand completely the predicates such as ‘is scary’ or ‘is tasty’ unless she knows that whenever they are ascribed correctly to anything there is some perspective or other relative to which the ascriptions have been made. When one is willing to admit that the predicates of taste can be ascribed to something *irrespective* of any perspective whatsoever, she could hardly be said to master their meaning.

Our semantic theory should comply with this empirical datum. No doubt, the standard semantics does it. It claims that reference to perspective is directly involved in the meanings of the predicates of taste; the speaker is supposed to know the meaning of such a predicate provided she realizes that its correct application has to be relativized to perspective. The standard semantics thus neatly explains this datum.

If it is denied that the semantic content of a predicate of taste involves reference to perspective the proper understanding of it could be achieved regardless of the speaker's ability to recognize that the object designated is scary or tasty only relative to some perspective or other. Understanding a predicate of taste and recognizing that its application is to be relativized to perspective would be independent of one another. A competent speaker would be able to grasp a complete meaning of a predicate of taste without recognizing its dependence on perspectives; in other words, she would be admitted to under-

⁸ Obviously, this empirical datum is independent of the notion of perspective taken as a theoretical notion belonging to a certain semantic theory. What I want to say in the main text is, however, that a competent speaker of the language, when facing an utterance of a sentence about taste, knows that the author of the utterance invokes some criteria or other in ascribing the predicate of taste to something.

stand properly what it means to say of an object that it is scary or that it is tasty regardless of anything else. Does it make sense to say that the speaker knows what a predicate of taste means provided she does not recognize its dependence on perspectives? Is it to be assumed that the speaker firstly learns a predicate of taste with its meaning and only thereafter comes to recognize, as an additional (and perhaps incidental) piece of information, that its correct application is to be relativized to perspective? I don't think so. Such a possibility would hardly be true of the predicates of taste appearing in natural languages. This seems to be the bullet the relativist should bite; for, as we have seen, she claims that the predicates such as 'is tasty' express properties of objects rather than relation between objects and perspectives. So, if we are to believe the relativist that this is a plausible story of what it means to understand the predicates of taste, she should provide us with an illuminating answer to the following question:

What a competent speaker of the language actually knows about the meanings of the predicates of taste and about their correct usage when she is able to understand them?

Apparently, this consideration contradicts the simple observation put forward at the beginning of this section. The relativist might, therefore, want to deny this consideration; she might claim that her theory does not amount to the conclusion that a competent speaker understands the predicates of taste without recognizing their dependence on perspectives. In such a case, however, she should provide us with an answer to the following question:

How a competent speaker comes to realize that the predicates of taste can be correctly applied to objects or other suitable kinds of entities only relative to perspective unless she is allowed to "read" such a thing from the expressions' meanings?

Thus, what we are after here is a plausible explanation of the simple observation given above. Such an explanation should beat the one supplied by the standard semanticist according to which reference to perspective is encoded in the very meaning of the predicates of taste.

4. Recognizing the Perspective Dependence of Propositions. The relativist claims that the propositions expressed by the utterances of (1) – (3) do not involve reference to perspectives. Rather than being constituent parts of what the utterances express, the perspectives enter just the circumstances of evaluation of the propositions expressed. This fact gives rise to another problem which can be motivated by the following observation.

Imagine a competent speaker of the language who understands the utterances of sentences (1*) – (3*):

- (1*) Horror movies are scary according to the standards of fear SF.
- (2*) Spinach is tasty according to the standards of taste ST.
- (3*) Jokes about blondes are funny according to the sense of humour SH.

These utterances can be supposed to express the perspective-specific propositions (1P*) – (3P*), respectively, stated in Section 1. The speaker grasps these propositions as the semantic contents of the above utterances and comes to realize, thereby, that horror movies are classified as scary relative to the standards of fear SF or that jokes about

blondes are taken as funny relative to the sense of humour SH. The truth value of the proposition expressed by an utterance of (1*) is thus determined relative to the standards of fear SF and the truth value of the proposition expressed by (3*) is determined relative to the sense of humour SH. Other standards of fear or other senses of humour are irrelevant here and the speaker has no reason to consider them in assigning the truth values to the respective propositions.

Now consider the relativist's treatment of the utterances of (1) – (3); they are supposed to express the perspective-neutral propositions (1P) – (3P), respectively. Things seem to be widely different here. Importantly, there is no reference to perspectives in the propositions (1P) – (3P). As a result, the speaker is allowed to grasp the utterances' semantic contents as completely as possible without being alerted, solely on the basis of the propositions expressed, that their truth values assignments are sensitive to perspectives. Despite this fact, the speaker is assumed to be aware of their dependence on perspectives. But how can she realize that the propositions (1P) – (3P) are to be evaluated as true or false at the circumstances of evaluation involving perspectives? The propositions (1P) – (3P), unlike (1P*) – (3P*), give no hint about the fact that a special involvement of perspectives is required in their truth values assignments. This problem generalizes to all sentences about taste and the propositions expressed by their utterances.

Thus, given the fact that the perspective-neutral propositions expressed by the utterances of sentences about taste involve no reference to perspectives and that the perspectives are an indispensable part of the circumstances of evaluation relative to which such propositions are to be evaluated, the relativist owes us an illuminating answer to the following question:

How a competent speaker of the language who grasps the semantic contents of the utterances of (1) – (3) without any loss may detect that the propositions expressed are to be evaluated at non-standard circumstances of evaluation involving perspectives?

To put the above problem differently, suppose the competent speaker of the language understands the sentences (5) – (7) as completely as possible:

- (5) Albert is lazy.
- (6) The whale is a mammal.
- (7) There are no unicorns in the zoo.

No doubt, the truth values assignments to the utterances of sentences such as (5) – (7) are to be relativized to standard circumstances of evaluation in which there is no room for perspectives. And if the speaker understands the sentences such as (5) – (7) as completely as possible she thereby knows that the truth values of their utterances are not sensitive to perspectives. Consequently, it may strike one as a rather demanding requirement that the speaker be aware of the special involvement of perspectives in the case of utterances of (1) – (3). There seems to be no peculiar difference between the sentences (1) – (3) on the one hand and the sentences (5) – (7) on the other hand that would justify such a special treatment of the former set of sentences. According to the relativist, both sets of sentences are alike in that the propositions expressed by their utterances involve no reference to

perspectives whatsoever; yet the propositions expressed by the utterances of (1) – (3), unlike those expressed by the utterances of (5) – (7), are supposed to be evaluated relative to non-standard circumstances of evaluation. How can we explain this apparent difference in truth values assignments without any corresponding difference between the contents of the two sets of propositions? This worry is motivated by the suspicion that perspectives in relativism seem to behave like a kind of *deus ex machina*: there is no trace of perspectives at the level of the semantic content; yet, they are suddenly assigned a crucial role in the truth values assignments.

What I am alluding to here is the following empirical fact: The competent speaker of the language knows that there is no special involvement of perspectives in the truth values assignments to the utterances of (5) – (7); she also knows that there is a special involvement of perspectives in the truth values assignments to the utterances of (1) – (3). The standard semantics provides us with a neat explanation of this difference. According to it, the propositions expressed by the utterances of (1) – (3), unlike those expressed by the utterances of (5) – (7), involve reference to perspectives and, therefore, it is natural for the speaker to pay attention to perspectives in the former and ignore in the latter case. The relativist cannot employ such an explanation and, thus, should provide us with another one in which the apparent difference between the two sets of propositions would be justified in a different, though equally satisfactory, manner.

5. Selecting the Right Kind of Perspective. There is a further problem closely related to the previous one. Even if the relativist provides us with a satisfactory answer to the question put forth in the previous section it cannot be the end of the story. It is since the fact that we need to know more about the mechanism responsible for the choice of the required kind of perspective. Again, the need for such a mechanism can be motivated by the following observation.

Whenever the competent speaker of the language is going to evaluate the proposition expressed by a particular utterance of a sentence about taste she bases her evaluation on a particular *kind* of perspective. When she evaluates the proposition expressed by an utterance of (1) she invokes certain psychological standards of scariness; in the case of the proposition expressed by an utterance of (2) she invokes particular culinary standards of taste; finally, in the case of the proposition expressed by an utterance of (3) she invokes a particular sense of humour. Moreover, she knows that the proposition expressed by an utterance of (2), for example, cannot be evaluated as true or false relative to *other* kinds of perspective such as psychological standards of fear or senses of humour; these kinds of perspective are utterly irrelevant with respect to the truth value of the proposition expressed by an utterance of (2) even though they are relevant for the truth value assignment to other kinds of propositions. To put it simply, the competent speaker of the language is capable to discern the correct involvement of the perspective from an incorrect one. Again, this is a plain empirical datum and our semantic theory should comply with it.

It is by no means a surprise that the standard semantics nicely complies with this empirical datum. The reason is that there are no perspective-neutral propositions about taste according to the standard semantics. Since every proposition about taste is perspec-

tive-specific, it involves not only a reference to some kind of perspective or other but also a reference to a particular kind of perspective. This is what can be explicitly seen in the case of the propositions such as (1P*) – (3P*). So, there is no need for an additional explanation of selecting the particular kind of perspective.

Now, concerning the perspective-neutral propositions (1P) – (3P) the things are much more complicated. Since there is no reference to any *particular* kind of perspective in the perspective-neutral propositions, we may wonder how it happens that, for each of these propositions, the circumstances of evaluation involve one *particular* kind of perspective rather than another. For example, the proposition (2P) involves no reference to any culinary standards of taste and the proposition (3P) is completely silent about any sense of humour. Anyway, we are supposed to evaluate the former proposition relative to some culinary standards or other and the latter proposition relative to a certain sense of humour. Or so it is assumed by the relativist's semantics. So, since there is no reference to any kind of perspective in the proposition expressed and since there are various kinds of perspective – culinary, aesthetic, ethical, psychological, etc. – available, the relativist owes us an illuminating answer to the following question:

How a competent speaker of the language who grasps the semantic contents of the utterances of (1) – (3) without any loss may detect that any of the propositions expressed is to be evaluated at one particular kind of perspective rather than another?

True, it strikes us as completely natural to suppose that whenever there is an utterance of a sentence featuring the term 'tasty' the perspective invoked would concern culinary standards. By the same way of reasoning, whenever there is an utterance of a sentence involving the term 'funny' the perspective invoked would concern senses of humour rather than anything else. Although we need an explanation of this fact, the relativist has provided us with none. Strictly speaking, the relativist's requirement that the circumstances of evaluation should involve some kind of perspective is met even in the case that *any* kind of perspective is supplied. Thus, the circumstances of evaluation invoked with respect to the proposition (2P) might incorporate an aesthetic perspective instead of the culinary one and the relativist's thirst should be quenched. However, this is not what would satisfy us. Without such an explanation the relativist's semantics would remain *ad hoc*. This is a serious drawback of any semantic theory because *ad hoc* explanations are not systematic.

6. Conclusion. Relativism about truth seems to be an attractive semantic position and has a wide range of applications. In particular, it seems to offer interesting explanations in the case of sentences about taste and the semantic contents of their utterances. What is the most significant feature of relativism is that it does not take the perspectives relative to which the predicates of taste could be ascribed to objects, events or other suitable kinds of entities to be propositional constituent. Rather, it considers them as non-standard parameters of the circumstances of evaluation.

Notwithstanding its superficial appeal, relativism has been unmasked as rather indeterminate in certain important respects. I have raised three problems for relativism that

should be solved in a more thoroughgoing formulation of the theory. As far as I can see, all of them were motivated by the special role assigned to perspectives as non-standard parameters of the circumstances of evaluation. Firstly, relativism seemed to be at variance with a way a competent speaker of the language was supposed to understand the predicates of taste. Secondly, despite involving no reference to perspectives whatsoever, the perspective-neutral propositions about taste were assigned the truth values relative to non-standard circumstances of evaluation involving perspectives; this is what should be explained somehow. Thirdly, it was also deemed to be rather unclear how one should determine the right kind of perspective to be used in the truth evaluation of the perspective-neutral propositions about taste. Illuminating solutions to these problems would certainly provide a valuable motivation for relativism about truth.

The problems presented with respect to the utterances of sentences about taste generalize, in obvious ways, to other kinds of sentences usually submitted to the relativistic treatment. For in all of these cases it is assumed that (i) there is no reference to perspectives in the propositions expressed by the utterances of such sentences and yet (ii) the circumstances of evaluation are supposed to involve perspectives (or other non-standard parameters).⁹

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