

OBSTACLES TO THE RELATIVITY OF TRUTH

Tomáš Marvan

The introductory section of the paper attempts to clarify the theoretical framework of truth-relativism. The paper then presents three obstacles to those who would like to relativise truth of a statement. These concern the distinction between absolutely and relatively true statements, the identity of a proposition across different perspectives and the possibility of distinguishing between various ways of construing the truth predicate.

Truth-relativism is one of the doctrines philosophers are particularly fond of refuting. Compared to other well-known targets of recurrent philosophical attacks (scepticism, in particular) it seems to be an easy prey, especially in its less sophisticated versions. I thus feel obliged to justify the following rumination on this well-worn subject. The justification is this: I have seen a couple of quite recent defenses of versions of truth-relativism¹ that are interesting enough to merit our attention. However, I believe none of them is successful, and my aim in this short paper is to expound why.

1. Clarifications

First of all, some clarifications are needed. To begin with, any relativist must fill in the following schema in some way:

(T) Relative to S , x is T ; relative to S' , x is not T .²

Thus, to take an example: "Relative to my standards, my income is small; relative to your standards, it's not small."³ A minor qualification is needed at this point. The relativist, of course, will hold that no parameter

¹ In particular, those of Hales (1997), Kölbel (2002), (2004), Lynch (1998), MacFarlane (2005) and Shogenji (1997).

² I don't want to claim any originality on this point. The template resembles, for example, that of Kölbel (2002), 117; my idea of the (T) took its shape in conversation with Petr Kořátko who was commenting on a particularly muddled point in my dissertation thesis.

³ Notice that the income in question is on the position of x which remains *invariant* across differing standards of evaluation; this is one of the things to bear in mind in the following discussion.

to which the x is relativized – no “relativizer,” as I will call it henceforward – is *uniquely correct*. S and S' are equally commendable as relativizers, there being no way to decide between them.

(T) contains three types variables. This accounts for the fact that versions of relativism abound. Let me, therefore, make one thing clear at the outset: perhaps there are *local* formulations of relativism (say, in matters of taste) that are unobjectionable; I have no intention to attack the relativistic approach in general in this paper. Rather, I will be concerned with the relativity of truth of *cognitive* or *factualist* claims,⁴ since it is this version of relativism that I find particularly challenging, but also particularly afflicted with serious difficulties. And since in this paper I want to focus exclusively on claims purporting to state some truths, I will modify the template accordingly:

(R) Relative to S , claim C is true; relative to S' , C is not true.

Next thing that needs to be specified is the *scope* of the relativity in question. Does the relativist hold *all* cognitive claims to be truth-relativized in some specific manner, or does he intend to relativize only some selected subset of them? The latter seems to be more sensible strategy, for it would enable the relativist to hold some of his own claims to be non-relatively true, escaping thus the well-worn charge of self-refutation.⁵ Also, even apart from this charge, at least *some* things simply must hold non-relatively if relativism is to be formulated at all. This is vividly expressed by Chris Swoyer, in the following manner (2003, sect. 5.9.1. titled “Complete Metastasis”):

[T]he very same belief (or sentence), call it p , can be true in Wilbur’s framework, W , but false in Sam’s framework, S . But if truth is relative [...] it can also be true in Wilbur’s framework W that p is true in W and false in Sam’s framework S that p is true in Wilbur’s framework W . There is not even any objective fact about what is true in any given framework.

A sensible strategy for the relativist would be to divide claims into absolutely true and relatively true ones. Granted this, the relativist is free to hold that, for example, his master claim to the effect that all claims (of

⁴ I take cognitive and factualist claims to be opposed to evaluative – moral, aesthetic etc. – claims, i.e. claims aiming to state an objective matter of fact. The term “claim” itself needs to be made more precise. I will get to it presently.

⁵ Briefly: if every claim is only relatively true, then also the claim that all claims are only relatively true is itself true only relatively; hence you are not obliged to accept it, since relative to your standards it might be false.

some specified sort) are only relatively true is itself exempt from the very kind of relativity in question, forming thus an instance of an absolutely true claim. Moreover, the assertion, say, “‘*p*’ is true relative to a set of cognitive standards of Wilbur’s framework” might then be said to be *objectively* valid, regardless of the point of view adopted. Since my strategy in this paper is to give the relativist the best shot at producing a respectable version of his doctrine, I will work with this sort of non-general, limited-scope relativism.

Clearly, another thing to be specified is the nature of the relativizers *S* and *S'* in (R) above. As indicated, the list of the candidate relativizers seems to be almost boundless: not only, in its most radical subjectivist version, individual speakers, but also “conceptual schemes, conceptual frameworks, linguistic frameworks, forms of life, modes of discourse or thought, *Weltanschauungen*, disciplinary matrices, paradigms, constellations of absolute presuppositions, points of view, perspectives, or worlds” can be taken to be ones.⁶ It’s pointless to continue the list, though it could be done; my intention here is not to provide an exhaustive list of all the relativizers I can think of. Instead, I propose to consider a candidate for *S* that seems promising and appealed to in the literature. Prominent recent defenders of relativism such as Steven D. Hales and Max Kölbel take *perspective* as the most suitable relativizer. They believe that a claim can be true with respect to one perspective, false with respect to another. I do not want to pretend to understand the notion of a perspective clearly, but let’s take it in a quite informal way, as Hales seems to be suggesting (1997, 42): I happen to have a certain individual perspective on the world, and it is only relative to it that a claim can be evaluated as true or false. If things go well, I happen to share a perspective with others around me, but it is not necessarily the case. There might be people who evaluate the truth of (some group of) claims relative to a markedly different perspective. In the following, I am thus going to restrict my attention predominantly to the Hales-Kölbel version: relative to perspective *S*, a claim *C* is true; relative to perspective *S'*, *C* isn’t true.

Yet another thing must be untwisted before we move on. One should not conflate *indexical* relativity with *genuinely* relative ascription of truth-values. Indexical relativity is, paradigmatically, thought to occur at the level of utterances whose content must yet be specified with the help of

⁶ I quote from Meiland – Krausz (1982), 84.

relevant contextual parameter(s). Thus, the utterance “I am less than 2 meters tall” will turn out to be true or false only after the relevant contextual parameter – the identity of the speaker, in the present case – is revealed.⁷ The thesis of genuine relativity of truth, however, is much stronger, since it holds that relativity persists even at the level of claims the relevant contextual parameters of which are fully determined.⁸ I will use the term “claim” to indicate this saturation of contextual parameters and shall confine myself to the alleged phenomenon of genuine relativity, i.e. the relative truth of claims – or, if you prefer a more traditional usage, of *propositions*.

In what follows, I am going to present a series of obstacles to the truth-relativity of claims, and corresponding tasks for the truth-relativist.

2. First Obstacle: Relatively vs. Absolutely True

In the preceding section I mentioned a possible relativistic strategy for evading the infamous self-destructive consequences of the idea that truth-values of all claims are distributed only in a relative fashion. The strategy is to acquiesce the view that claims of selected sorts are true absolutely, i.e. non-relatively – in the sense adopted in this paper, absolutely true claims cannot be true in one perspective and false in a different one. The relativist thus proposes a bifurcation of true claims into two subsets, the relatively true claims and the absolutely true ones.⁹

However, the proposal has a serious drawback. Chris Swoyer points to it when he asks the relativist: what are the criteria of division of claims into relative and absolutely true ones?¹⁰ After all, the only obvious rationale for such a distinction is the relativist’s need to escape the unpalatable consequences of a too radical relativistic thesis (*viz.*, that each true claim is true only relative to a perspective and might be false in other

⁷ The Kaplanian distinction between *character* and *content* might be helpful at this point: the statement “I am less than 2 meters tall” has the same character in the mouths of different speakers, but different contents.

⁸ For details, see Kölbel (2004).

⁹ The strategy of demarcation is not open to some defenders of relativism such as Hales who defines the opposite of relativism (“absolutism”) as simply the claim that not everything is relatively true, i.e., “there is at least one proposition which has the same truth value in all perspectives” (1997, 35).

¹⁰ See his (1982).

perspectives). The suggestion, Swoyer rightly observes, has a rather unattractive ring of a completely *ad hoc* defence move. A criterion of demarcation is sought after by the relativist only when his doctrine has been laid down.

Lynch's work, to take one example, bears out that the diagnosis is accurate. He distinguishes (1998, esp. 142) between relatively, absolutely and "virtually absolutely" true claims. Relatively true claims are true in some perspectives, false in others. Absolutely true claims are true regardless of any perspective, true *simpliciter*. Finally, virtually absolutely true claims are true *in all conceptual schemes* (Lynch's preferred version of the relativizer). These claims are thus still true only in a relative way, but they share the special feature of being true relative to *all* instances of a given type of relativizer. This is an attempt to have it both ways, i.e., to hold the notion of a relativizer ("conceptual scheme") in its place, while allowing for the category of claims that do not change their truth-values across different relativizers. However, Lynch doesn't answer Swoyer's question: the distinction between relative and virtually absolutely true claims (in the domain of factual claims) remains unmotivated.

To be sure, according to the standards adopted in this paper, the category of virtual absolutes is not even truly relativistic, since it does not conform to (R): if a claim *C* is true in all perspectives and false in none, then it is not a relatively true claim in my sense of the term. However, let me add a comment on Lynch's proposal, lest it be complained that I overlook an interesting category of claims, the "virtual absolutes," on some purely legalistic grounds. My problem with the proposal is simple: I have difficulty to distinguish virtually absolute claims from straight absolutes. Lynch's definition of absolutes, if it makes any sense at all, is needlessly strong. As I see it, an absolutely true claim is a *non-relatively* true claim, i.e., claim that cannot be true in one perspective and false in another one. But Lynch would have us imagine a category of claims true "outside all" conceptual schemes. I am not at all sure what this is supposed to mean. Of course, any true claim is uttered, thought or written on the basis of this or that conceptual scheme, or from this or that perspective (well, if you wish to speak this way). This, however, doesn't make its *truth* relative in any intelligible way. If I understand Lynch's understanding of conceptual schemes, we need schemes in order to *formulate* claims, not to assess their truth values – for a scheme is "a network of general and specific concepts used in the propositions we ex-

press in language and in thought” (Lynch 1997, 45).¹¹ Moreover, the truth of a claim can be said to be relative to a conceptual scheme only on condition that claims could migrate between different conceptual schemes, a possibility that goes against the grain of distinguishing between different conceptual schemes and their varying conceptual resources in the first place.¹²

A possible start for the relativist propounding the division into relatively true and absolutely true claims (which division faces Swoyer’s charge of an *ad hoc* defense move) would be to propose a (non-relative) classification of various areas of discourse (cognitive, ethical, aesthetical, logical, religious etc.) and to show which sorts of claims admit of relativistic treatment and which don’t. For clearly, as I already indicated, first of all we should see what behaves in a relativistic fashion, and only then can we move to a formulation of relativism of a limited sort. The worry is, however, that once this division of discourse into different compartments is carried out, the prospects for a substantive relativism disappear, for it might transpire that only some non-factualist types of discourses (statements expressing subjective preferences of agents, for example) admit of relativization; and, of course, it was predominantly the idea that even *factualist* discourses need to be treated in a relativistic manner what provoked critical reactions towards relativism (and what needs, correspondingly, to be persuasively argued for).¹³

3. Second Obstacle: The Identity of a Proposition across Perspectives

A relativistic model which respects the schema (R) and seems local enough is provided by Gilbert Harman. Harman holds that ethical claims implicitly involve reference to the moral standards of the culture or community the person making the claim belongs to. In his own words:

[f]or the purposes of assigning truth conditions, a judgement of the form, it would be morally wrong of P to D, has to be understood as elliptical for a

¹¹ For a helpful summary of Lynch’s views see Hales (2001).

¹² I say more about this situation in my (2003) paper.

¹³ However, I do not wish to claim that such a stratification of our discourse is an easy thing to do. See Wright (2001).

judgement of the form, *in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D.*¹⁴

The point is obvious: there is no objective matter of fact concerning morality of a deed – objective in the sense of independent of any particular moral perspective. Concerning the deed D it might transpire that relative to a moral framework M' it is deemed to be morally *right* thing to do. And if this could be made good for ethics, why not for matters cognitive?

Note that a crucial precondition of truth-relativism (of any particular brand) is that the relativizer – referential moral framework, perspective, etc. – doesn't affect the individuation of the action evaluated morally right or wrong. And it seems implausible that in the case of morals, the deed D which is being evaluated as morally right or as morally wrong is individuated quite independently of the moral framework implicitly involved in the evaluation.¹⁵ Therefore, unless some evidence to the contrary is adduced, Harman's model fails as an instance of a viable local relativism. One of the tasks of the relativist is thus to make sure that the evaluated thing in question is individuated independently of the applied relativizer (otherwise one will have to conclude that people applying different frameworks or perspectives actually speak about different things altogether, what would be the end of relativism). And this is what I see as the hardest challenge for the truth-relativist.

The case of moral relativism is, admittedly, special in that moral discourse seems to be non-factualist. However, as already indicated, I am mainly interested in factualist versions of truth-relativism, because it is this version that makes least sense to me. So let us take the schema (R) and substitute some ordinary *factual* claim for its C:

Relative to a perspective S, the claim "Winston Churchill was born in Prague" is true; relative to (our) perspective S', the same claim is false.

I am not sure what to make of this. If there really is a perspective S in which it is true that Churchill was born in Prague, than we will be inclined to say that people bound by that perspective most certainly speak about different things than we do – they mean different things by their words. But if this is the case, the relativist breaches one of the conditions

¹⁴ Harman (1996), 4, quoted in Baghramian (2004), 86.

¹⁵ An illustration: the action D, which is identified in the moral framework M as a "murder," might be identified in an alternative framework M' as a "revenge" or "deserved punishment." The D, in other words, simply will not be *the same D* in competing moral frameworks.

of his thesis, namely that *the same claim* is asserted or denied in alternative perspectives. Now, perhaps the relativist will retort that he *does* view the content of *C* as constant from one perspective to another. Well, if he does, he can only mean that since the identical proposition is expressed, it is the *perspectives themselves* which somehow make the same claim true or false, the world being constant across different perspectives.¹⁶ I confess that I cannot see how it could become true that Churchill was born in Prague due only to the change in perspective; moreover, being no dialetheist, I am troubled by the fact that the proposal in question violates the law of non-contradiction ($\sim(C \wedge \sim C)$).¹⁷ Given all this, the only thing I can do at present is to wait for some argument in support of this peculiar thesis.

Let me conclude this section by remarking that, generally speaking, apart from cases when one of the parties is definitely wrong and can be corrected, the more vivid disagreement there is concerning the truth of some factual claim, the less confidence there is that the disagreeing parties don't talk past each other, i.e., in the present context, accept or reject the same claim. This is quite evident in cases where translation amongst different languages is involved: the fact that people disagree on truth or falsity of a claim which is supposed to state the same in both languages can be taken as indicating that the translation method employed is inadequate.¹⁸ A curse of the relativist is that it is *his* task to show that the discussants indeed have the same proposition in mind, on pain of relinquishing the schema (R) – that is, on pain of ceasing to be a proponent of

¹⁶ I mean, claims are made true, if anything, jointly by the perspective *and* the world; but since the world remains presumably the same, only the difference in perspective adopted can account for the difference in truth values of the claims.

¹⁷ Furthermore, the proposal in question goes against the grain of one of the classical principles of semantics, viz. that a difference in truth-value of two claims implies a corresponding difference in the propositions expressed.

Incidentally, there is yet a different worry, adumbrated by Percival (1994), 208–210, which concerns the fact that it is difficult to prove that the disagreement over the truth-value of *C* is *intransigent*, i.e., that our opponent is not just *wrong* in holding $\sim C$ against our *C*. Why should we ever want to accept that our opponent is equally in the right in holding his $\sim C$ against our *C*? On the contrary, the rational response would be rather to urge him to renounce it.

¹⁸ Cf. Edwards (1990), 4.

genuine truth-relativism.¹⁹ It is a demanding task, for the relativist needs to ensure the stability of the proposition in question, craving at the same time for a radical difference in its evaluation in alternative frameworks.

Concluding observation: perhaps what the relativists have in mind is the fact that our view of what is true or false change, at least in some quarters of discourse. Perhaps in some matters we will never be able to discover the truth, they think, and so each can claim his right to defend what seems right from his own perspective. Now, if this is indeed what they think, two retorts are in place. First, it must, again, be carefully specified which types of discourse are vulnerable to this principled inscrutability of truth – for certainly, the truth of the claims to the effect that Churchill was born in Prague or that the Earth moves are not subject to this perspectivalist treatment. And secondly, if we agree that in some parts of the discourse the truth is not to be had, we should rather opt for suspending all talk of truth in these areas, instead of tolerating irresponsible proliferation of “truths”. As Crispin Wright has noted, when two people disagree over the truth of an x and there is no way to resolve their disagreement, we must be prepared to hold that both participants are equally *off-beam*.

4. Third Obstacle: Proliferation of Truths

Is there a special notion of “truth-in-perspective”, to be sharply distinguished from the common notion of truth *simpliciter*? J. W. Meiland (1977) would indeed see truth not as a concept of a two-term relation of, say, a proposition and the world, but rather as a concept of a *three-term*, if mostly implicit, relation of a proposition, the world and, say, a perspective (Meiland mentions other relativizers as well but I will stick to perspectives.) From the relativist’s point of view, such a distinction is not without appeal. Upon accepting it, it would seem, the relativist could try to defend his position by claiming that some claims are true in the ordinary sense, while others are “true-in-perspective”; or, if he is radical enough, he can banish the old-fashioned notion of truth altogether and get along with truth-in-perspective only (I cannot determine which option is desirable from Meiland’s point of view).

¹⁹ Hales (1997), 48, seems to abandon the requirement of identity of the proposition asserted in different schemes, which suggests that he is, after all, no genuine relativist.

The actual manner in which Meiland introduces the three-term notion of truth-in-perspective makes it plain that for him, the distinction between relative and absolute truth cuts deep; for him, the relativist's three-term notion *does not include* the two-term relation of absolute truth. According to Meiland, one can no more reasonably ask what "true" means in the expression "true-in-perspective" than "one can ask what 'cat' means in the word 'cattle'" (1977, 574).

At first sight one is likely to suppose that there are just *two* different kinds of truth-notions, truth *simpliciter* and "truth-in-perspective". This, however, is not the case. If I understand Meiland's suggestion correctly, every perspective has its own notion of truth (and falsehood) associated with idiosyncratic set of criteria of its employment: the potential number of different notions of truth is, in fact, *indefinite*. The various truth-concepts differ from perspective to perspective, their number depending on the number of (different) perspectives adopted. Any claim thus can take any of the potentially boundless variety of truth-values: "true-in-perspective_{p1}," "false-in-perspective_{p2}," ... "true-in-perspective_{px}."

At this point I would, once more, recourse to my schema (R), in order to show that the unorthodox three-term strategy won't buttress the relativistic project either: the template (R) tumbles down when tucked in with Meilandian truth predicate. Notice that the (R) requires that not only the claim evaluated, but also *the evaluative predicate itself* remains invariant in both of its occasions of use within (R), with the single difference that the negation sign is attached to it in the latter part of (R). This requirement isn't fulfilled in the situation as canvassed by Meiland, for there the schema (R) would employ altogether different predicates at its evaluative positions: for example, "true-in-perspective_{p1}" and "untrue-in-perspective_{p2}."

The truth-relativist of the Meilandian sort owes us an explanation of what is the connection, if any, of the various individual concepts of truth-in-perspective. If there is no connection, it is unclear to me how Meiland's discussion touches on issues of truth-relativism at all. To make an analogy, the fact that different perspectives attribute different properties to a single claim does not bring in relativity any more than the fact that one can attribute the property of being tall and the property of being smart to a single person. Therefore, that there will be some non-trivial connection between the respective truth-concepts I take to be beyond doubt. One such connection concerns the laws that govern the

use of these differing concepts. For example, I presume that Meiland would hold that the law of non-contradiction governs the use of every single one of these concepts, though the application of the law is limited to a particular perspective adopted at the time (that is, it cannot be applied across different perspectives). Another thing that the three-term concept of truth will share with the traditional two-term concept is that both, according to Meiland, can be explained in terms of correspondence of a claim with something in reality.

We are thus provided with a mysterious new truth-concept which is partly parasitic on the one to which we are accustomed, partly behaves in a completely different manner. The task for the relativist is therefore to show us the nature of this new concept, its precise functioning and its very point. Pending this, we can be excused for looking at the concept of truth-in-perspective askance.

5. Conclusion

Opponents of factual truth-relativism like to make comments about the lack of intelligence on the part of those who support the relativism in question. I do not intend to join them, for the problem, to my mind, lies rather in a simple confusion. The confusion can be cleared up by carefully attending to the schema (R) and its implications. The maxim based on it which I recommend to subsequent participants in the relativism debate is this: speak of the relativity of truth only when you can secure that the same claim can be evaluated as true or as false, depending on the relativizer used. Apart from this, I have adverted to two additional tasks for the truth-relativist. The first concerns the delimiting of the scope of relativism and indicating which claims retain absolute truth; the criterion of demarcation of absolutely true and relatively true claims must be made sufficiently precise. The second task concerns only the truth-relativists who would follow Meiland in working with the notion of a truth-in-perspective: make clear the nature of the concept of the three-term relation and show its links with a straightforward concept of truth.²⁰

²⁰ I thank Maria Lasonen, Dan Zeman, Marián Zouhar and an anonymous referee for helpful comments.

Filosofický ústav AV ČR
Jiřská 1
110 00 Praha 1
marvan@flu.cas.cz

REFERENCES

- BAGHRAMIAN, M. (2004): *Relativism*. Routledge, London – New York.
- EDWARDS, S. D. (1990): *Relativism, Conceptual Schemes and Categorical Frameworks*. Avebury, Aldershot.
- HALES, S. D. (1997): A Consistent Relativism. *Mind* 106, 421, 33 – 52.
- HALES, S. D. (2001): Lynch's Metaphysical Pluralism. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63, 3, 699 – 709.
- HARMAN, G. (1996): Moral Relativism. In: Harman, G. – Jarvis Thomson, J. (eds.): *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*. Blackwell, Oxford, 1 – 64.
- KÖLBEL, M. (2002): *Truth without Objectivity*. Routledge, London – New York.
- KÖLBEL, M. (2004): Indexical Relativism vs Genuine Relativism. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, 3, 297 – 313.
- LYNCH, M. P. (1998): *Truth in Context. An Essay on Pluralism and Objectivity*. The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.).
- MACFARLANE, J. (2005): Making Sense of Relative Truth. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105, 1, 305 – 323.
- MARVAN, T. (2003): Dvě verze pojmového relativismu. *Organon F* 10, 2, 148 – 156.
- MEILAND, J. W. (1977): Concepts of Relative Truth. *The Monist* 60, 568 – 582.
- MEILAND, J. W. – Krausz, M. (eds.) (1982): *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.
- PERCIVAL, P. (1994): Absolute Truth. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 94, 2, 189 – 213.
- SHOENJI, T. (1997): The Consistency of Global Relativism. *Mind* 106, 424, 745 – 747.
- SWOYER, C. (1982): True For. In: Meiland – Krausz (1982), 84 – 108.
- SWOYER, C. (2003): Relativism. In: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (URL: plato.stanford.edu).
- WRIGHT, C. (2001): On Being in a Quandary. Relativism, Vagueness, Logical Revisionism. *Mind* 110, 437, 45 – 98.