

RELATIVISM AND ALETHIC FUNCTIONALISM

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ABSTRACT. The essay is an attempt to offer a version of conceptual relativism that escapes Donald Davidson's (widely thought) decisive criticisms of the notion of "conceptual scheme". Two variants of relativism are distinguished, a weaker and a stronger one, and a clear formulation of what a strong version amounts to is put forward. The concrete proposal involves accepting a version of alethic pluralism. After discussing alethic pluralism in general, and after exploring both strong and weak versions of it, a suitable version is presented: alethic functionalism. The final part offers an illustration of how embracing alethic functionalism may help the relativist.

KEYWORDS. Relativism, conceptual scheme, incommensurability, truth, alethic pluralism, alethic functionalism.

The idea of incommensurability between conceptual schemes has been put into disgrace by Donald Davidson's attack on conceptual relativism. His classic paper "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" has been for a long time the *locus classicus* of a rejection of conceptual relativism – so powerful that the doctrine has been considered practically hopeless.

The details of this rejection are well-known, so I won't go into much detail presenting them. Here is, in brief, Davidson's argument. For Davidson, to have a conceptual scheme is to have a language. On this assumption, the idea of incommensurability between two conceptual schemes comes down to the idea of a failure of translation between two languages. Incommensurability is, so to speak, the mark of the difference between conceptual schemes. Now Davidson's argument is simply that we cannot make sense of the idea of incommensurability – and, hence, of the idea of different conceptual schemes – because we cannot make sense of the idea of failure of translation, at least not in such a way as to preserve any significant difference between conceptual schemes. Davidson considers two possible cases of failure of translation: *total* and *partial*. In the first case, the argument is that if we cannot translate an alien language in ours *at all* then we don't have any evidence that there really is a language to be translated. In the second case, Davidson claims that

partial failure of translation makes sense only against a background of successful translation. This has the consequence that we will never be in a position to judge other's concepts as drastically different from our own. The idea of incommensurability just cannot take off the ground.¹

There have been a number of reactions to Davidson's challenges. Some of the authors taking up the issue claimed that identifying conceptual schemes with languages is not the only way of understanding conceptual schemes.² Others held that failure of translation does not imply that incommensurability is an incoherent or dubious notion. To think that different conceptual schemes don't exist only because we fail to translate some linguistic activity in our current languages would be to embrace a shallow form of verificationism about conceptual schemes.³ Yet others pointed out that there are different types or levels of translation and that the one Davidson takes as a standard is much too strong. What is required to make sense of alien conceptual schemes is not a straightforward, literal translation, but something more like an interpretation of the aliens' pronouncements.⁴

However, little progress has been made on this issue. Although I believe that Davidson's critics have made some good points in their defense of incommensurability, I don't want to take that line here. Instead of breeding new life into the notion of incommensurability, I rather advise dropping it altogether. My reason for doing so is not only that I think relativists can dispense with the notion of incommensurability (a claim that needs further argument, but which I won't pause to give here), but also that I think they should be better off without it. Among relativist positions, a distinction must be made between strong versions and weak versions.⁵ The weak versions all do make, in one way or another, appeal to the notion of incommensurability. In contrast, the strong versions are those in which the notion of incommensurability plays no role. Never-

¹ Davidson's argument that the notion of incommensurability is incoherent is one of the two he gives against conceptual relativism. The other is that the notion of conceptual scheme implies a dichotomy between scheme and content - the "third dogma of empiricism". Only the first relates directly to the issues discussed here. For more, see Davidson (1984).

² For example, Lynch (1998).

³ See, among others, Ludwig (1992) and Williamson (2004).

⁴ Forster (1998).

⁵ See Swoyer (2003) for details.

theless, it is easy to see why relativists have been forced to stay content with the weaker versions: it is because strong versions have been widely deemed as wildly implausible. In the remainder of this introduction I will try to locate the source of this implausibility by putting forward what I think a strong relativist position should amount to. The following sections are concerned with the implementation of a strategy that leads, in my opinion, to such a strong (and hopefully coherent) version of relativism.

Consider the following thesis that summarizes the kind of strong version of relativism that I have in mind:

REL: It is possible for two propositions, belonging to different conceptual schemes⁶ or theories

- (i) to contradict each other and
- (ii) to be both true.

This claim has been considered by most philosophers pure madness. Why is the thesis such a scandal? Because the joint satisfaction of (i) and (ii) is simply impossible. To see why it is impossible, we can appeal to the notion of truth-conditions. A proposition is true if its truth-conditions are fulfilled. Now, suppose that what means that a proposition's truth conditions are fulfilled is the obtaining of a state of affairs (the state of affairs the proposition is about). The contradictory of a proposition asserting that a given state of affairs obtains is a proposition that denies that the given state of affair obtains. If the proposition asserting that a given state of affairs obtains is true then the given state of affairs obtains. But a state of affairs cannot both obtain and not obtain. Since the obtaining of a state of affairs cancels its not obtaining, the truth-conditions of the proposition denying that the state of affairs obtains cannot be fulfilled. Hence, the proposition cannot be true. Therefore, contradictory propositions cannot be both true. There is no way, it is said, in which (i) and (ii) could be jointly satisfied.⁷

⁶ I take a conceptual scheme to be the collection of all the concepts one employs in dealing with the world ("the world" including herself, other people, various social and physical realities, etc).

⁷ The argument could also be run in the following way: suppose that by "fulfilling the truth-conditions" we understand "being coherent with a given body of propositions". This generalizes for any account of truth-conditions and, hence, of truth.

Thus the usual way for relativists to escape this predicament was to wholeheartedly accept incommensurability to the point of denying the importance of disagreement between different conceptual schemes. Nicholas Rescher is the champion of such a view, as could be seen from the following passage:

The most characteristic and significant sort of difference between one conceptual scheme and another thus does not lie in the sphere of disagreements or conflicts of the sort arising when the one theoretical framework holds something to be true that the other holds to be false. Rather, it arises when the one scheme is committed to something the other does not envisage at all – something that lies outside the conceptual horizons of the other (Rescher 1980, 333).

The failure of a conceptual scheme to “envisage” something that is beyond its “conceptual horizons” comes very close to the idea of incommensurability spoken about so far. Although Rescher does not exclude disagreements between conceptual schemes, he places the “most significant” differences between those in an area in which disagreement is absent. Since disagreement implies contradiction, and since there is nothing to disagree about, there is no contradiction. Propositions belonging to different conceptual schemes might be altogether true, but they don’t contradict each other. (i) is thus avoided.

Solutions such that favored by Rescher have given up (i) in favor of (ii). But this is a cheap victory. I claim that the relativist can and has to be more ambitious. Now, the obvious way in which a stronger version of relativism could be constructed is to strengthen the requirement of contradiction. The following thesis, which I call “the genuine contradiction thesis”, captures what this requirement is essentially about:

GC: Two propositions genuinely contradict each other if and only if:

- (a) they employ the same concepts;
- (b) they are judged in accordance with the same understanding of truth;
- (c) one is or implies the negation of the other.

As such, condition (a) endorses no commitment to any view about concepts (or sameness of concepts, for that matter); all that it says is that were the two propositions to contradict each other, they should employ the same concepts, however we conceive of them. It might seem unclear why I introduced condition (b), but one reason for doing so is the ac-

knowledge of the many divergent ways in which truth could be conceived. A safeguarding clause seemed to be needed to assure that the same understanding is preserved when we assess the two propositions' truth-value. In the same spirit as condition (a), condition (b) endorses no commitment to any view about truth. Another reason for introducing condition (b) is not to beg the question against pluralism about truth – the view that truth has a pluralistic nature. (I will discuss this issue in detail in part I.) Condition (b) is consistent with any form of alethic pluralism because it does not rule out that truth might have a pluralistic nature. Condition (c) shouldn't pose any problems, since it is the most natural way to express contradiction. Finally, I should add that the particle “non” (or other logical symbols for negation) has the same meaning across conceptual schemes.⁸

It is obvious that relativist views that embrace incommensurability – like that of Rescher presented above – cannot come to grips with all these conditions. But there are solutions, I claim, that preserve, in a way worth to be taken seriously, all the requirements in GC. One solution is “semantic”. That is, something like a two-factor semantics could be employed to make sense of the idea of a shared content between conceptual schemes that permits, at the same time, a divergence in that content – divergence stemming from the fact that the concepts belong to different conceptual schemes.⁹ Such a solution preserves condition (a), but allows the relativization of concepts to conceptual schemes. The second solution is to embrace alethic pluralism. This solution preserves condition (b), but allows different views about truth to play a role in making **REL** plausible. Condition (c) is trivial, so there is no need for any special solution for it.

Although I believe that the two solutions are strongly interconnected, I will be concerned here only with the second one. I will first present alethic pluralism in some detail and argue that it has to be combined with a form of minimalism, where “minimalism” is to be taken in a special sense that will become clear shortly. Next, I will present Michael

⁸ Namely, the meaning of negation in classical logic. For a non-classical (intuitionistic) attempt to deal with relativism that would result in a change in the meaning of negation, see Wright (2006). Also, for exploring a paraconsistent solution to relativism, see Beall (2006).

⁹ This is a parallel project with the one I'm forging in this paper. It is part of the bigger project of providing a viable version of conceptual relativism.

Lynch's version of alethic pluralism – "alethic functionalism" – as a way to avoid the problems strong versions of alethic pluralism have to face. At the end of section II I will briefly mention some objections to alethic functionalism and the answers to these. Finally, I will return to the crucial issue of whether this solution could be helpful for the relativist and show that alethic functionalism is an elegant way to fulfill the requirement (b) in GC. This will be just a small step towards the complete theory, but an important one nevertheless.

I

The first to have taken seriously the idea that truth might have a pluralistic nature was Crispin Wright. His book *Truth and Objectivity* marked a new turn in discussions about truth. Putting forward his view, Wright says:

The proposal is simply that any predicate that exhibits very general features qualifies, just on that account, as a truth predicate. That is quite consistent with acknowledging that there may, perhaps must be more to say about the content of any predicate that does have these features. But it is also consistent with acknowledging that there is a prospect of pluralism – that the more there is to say may well vary from discourse to discourse (Wright 1992, 37 – 38).

Subsequent discussions have set the task of further developing and shaping the "prospect of pluralism" Wright is alluding to. To see clearer what this task is, the following genealogical story of alethic pluralism might be useful.

Several pluralistic-minded philosophers like Cory Wright, Gyla Sher or Michael Lynch see alethic pluralism as the salutary alternative to two conflicting positions: what Sher (2004) called "substantivism" about truth – the view that truth is a robust property, with a unique nature, and deflationism – the view that truth has no nature, or is not a robust property. The latter view is taken by those philosophers to be a reaction to the repeated failures the search of a substantive theory of truth has led to. Deflationists have sanctioned those failures by drawing the conclusion that, in fact, there is nothing to search for. This reaction, pluralists claim, is an exaggeration. They acknowledge the lesson of deflationism, but refuse to draw the radical conclusion of deflationists. The reason for this is the uncovering of a common assumption on which both parties rely – namely, that truth should have a unique nature, that there should be

just one way in which different propositions, having different truth-conditions or belonging to different areas of discourse (physics, ethics, mathematics and so on) are all true. While siding with substantialism against deflationism's disdain of truth, pluralists see substantialism's monistic assumption as a mistake.

The problems generated by the aforementioned assumption are well known. This is how, for example, Simon Blackburn puts the problem:

We know individually what makes [the predicate 'is true'] applicable to the judgements or sentences of an understood language. 'Penguins waddle' is a sentence true, in English, if and only if penguins waddle. It is true that snow is white if and only if snow is white. The reason the first sentence deserves the predicate is that penguins waddle, and the reason why the judgement that snow is white deserves the predicate is that snow is white. But these reasons are entirely different. There is no single account, or even little family of accounts, in virtue of which each deserves the predicate, for deciding whether penguins waddle has nothing much in common with deciding whether snow is white. There are as many different things to do, to decide whether the predicate applies, as there are judgements to make. So how can there be a unified, common account of the "property" which these quite different decision procedures supposedly determine? (Blackburn 1984, 230)

Sher (2004) has claimed that the implicit argument¹⁰ in the above quotation shows nothing more than that the requirements on a theory of truth are too strong, and that we shouldn't see the goal of such a theory in providing an account of the truth conditions of every individual proposition. We can agree that this is so, but then we could shift the problem from the level of individual propositions to the level of discourses: propositions belonging to different discourses are true in different ways. The rigors of a given discourse might unify the propositions belonging to the discourse in question under one type of truth conditions; but this still leaves open the question how are we to capture all these types of truth conditions in a unitary view of truth. This is the problem called by

¹⁰ The argument, called by Sher "the radical disunity argument", is reconstructed, in rather Kantian terms, as follows:

- (a) Truth consists in the particular agreement of a thought with its unique object.
- (b) A general theory of truth must, in order to be general, abstract from the particularity of this relation.
- (c) But a substantive theory of truth cannot (if it is to be substantive) abstract from its particularity. Hence:
- (d) A general and substantive theory of truth is impossible (Sher 2004, 9 - 10).

Wright (2005) “the problem of the common denominator”; Lynch (2004) calls it “the scope problem”. Substantivism falls prey to this problem because, although successful in characterizing truth for some type of discourse or another (for example, the correspondence/causal account of truth fits well our day-to-day discourse, the coherence account is particularly suited for legal discourse, and so on), it had to face destructive counterexamples when trying to extend to other less manageable areas of discourse. The move from proposition-individuated truth conditions to discourse-individuated truth conditions is of no help for the substantivist.

The pluralist strategy is then to straightforwardly accept that truth has a pluralistic nature. This vindicates the substantivist claim that truth is a robust property and accounts for our intuition that propositions belonging to different discourses are true in different ways. But pluralism’s main attraction resides in the fact that it doesn’t have to solve the scope problem, since it allows that truth is something else for every kind of discourse. The derogation from this obligation gives pluralism at least a *prima facie* plausibility. But, even if the prospects look good, the view, as it stands, has severe shortcomings. As Lynch (2004) and Wright (2005) have pointed out, accepting that propositions belonging to different areas or discourses are true in different ways leads to an ambiguity in our concept of truth. On the uncontroversial assumption that different properties have to be picked up by different concepts, alethic pluralism introduces an unwanted variability in our concept of truth; thus the concept of truth becomes polysemic. However, there are strong reasons for not letting this to happen. For one thing, we wouldn’t be able to make blind generalizations of the form “Everything David Lewis said is true” for we cannot specify what kind of truth we are referring to, given David Lewis’ prodigious activity. For another, we would have to face the problem of “mixed inferences” (that is, inferences with premises belonging to different areas of discourse): if the premises are true in different ways, what kind of truth is preserved when we get to the conclusion?¹¹ Finally, for those who are keen to the idea that truth has an important normative role, allowing several concepts of truth will blur the concept’s generality (assuming, as Lynch does, that one of the features of normativity is generality).

The position described above has been called strong alethic pluralism (Wright 2005, Lynch 2004, 2005). The strong alethic pluralist has been

¹¹ See Tappolet (1997) for details.

driven to the conclusion that our concept of truth is ambiguous. But this conclusion is too strong. The problems faced by the strong version of alethic pluralism could be dissolved if we settle for a more moderate version of it: weak alethic pluralism. This latter view “holds that our ordinary concept of truth picks out a single alethic property – the property of being true – and that different propositions can have this property in virtue of having other properties” (Wright 2005, 6). The alethic property predicated of true propositions is contextually determined by the discourse it belongs to without ceasing to be the same property in all discourses. Unlike strong alethic pluralism, the weak version will secure the uniqueness of our concept of truth and, in the same time, make sense of all the different ways in which propositions belonging to different discourses are true.

Still, the problem that remains is how to pick up this single property of truth. One way to do this is to follow Crispin Wright’s strategy from *Truth and Objectivity*. Wright has proposed what might be called a platitude-based approach of truth. The core of the concept of truth is analytically given by the intuitive beliefs we have about truth.¹² All these platitudes “travel” from discourse to discourse, “supporting” other metaphysically weighted claims, in accordance with the necessities of the discourse in question.

Wright has called his version of alethic pluralism “minimalism”. It isn’t sure which version of alethic pluralism Wright had in mind when saying that minimalism is compatible with the “prospect of pluralism”. Regardless of that, it is this platitude-oriented sense in which the approach is called minimalism. This is the sense of minimalism I was mentioning in the beginning of the paper and this is why I said alethic pluralism has to be combined with a sort of minimalism about truth.¹³ The point of minimalism is to provide a unifying factor in our concept of

¹² For a list of such platitudes see, for example, Wright (1992, 34).

¹³ O’Leary-Hawthorne and Oppy (1997), surveying the multiplicity of senses in which the term is used in the literature, have found six different varieties of “minimalism”. The difference is made by what features those varieties take the predicate “is true” to have or not to have. So, the first holds that it isn’t a significant predicate; the second, that it expresses a sub-standard property; the third, that it has no supersense; the fourth, that it has a thin conceptual role; the fifth, that it expresses a property with no hidden essence. Finally, according to the sixth variety, “there is nothing worth saying about truth beyond what is already there in folk practice” (O’Leary-Hawthorne – Oppy 1997, 176). The platitude-based approach of Wright and Lynch is precisely of this sort.

truth: minimalism is the antidote for pluralism in its strong version. In the next section we will see one way to apply this strategy in order to get a suitable version of weak alethic pluralism.

II

Michael Lynch (2001; 2004; 2005) has proposed and defended a view about truth that seems to be a pluralist-cum-minimalist solution to the problems with strong alethic pluralism. Let me briefly present the view.

As well as Wright's minimalism, Lynch's alethic functionalism starts from the bulk of common sense beliefs we have about truth. These common sense beliefs – the platitudes about truth – constitute our concept of truth in the following sense. Lynch's main insight is that these platitudes can be seen as specifying the role, or job, the truth has in our cognitive economy. The intuitive beliefs we have about truth form what could be called our "folk theory of truth". The beliefs belonging to this folk theory relate the concept of truth to other special concepts, such as "fact", "proposition" and the like (all these are called by Lynch "alethic concepts"), but also with other, non-alethic concepts, such as "object", "person", "snow", "white" etc. The platitudes constitute our concept of truth by specifying the role, or job it has among the other concepts – that is, by specifying the relations in which it stands with both alethic and non-alethic concepts.

The analogy here is, of course, with functionalism in the philosophy of mind. According to analytic or common sense functionalists,

[p]ain is the state that tends to be caused by bodily injury, to produce the belief that something is wrong with the body and the desire to be out of that state, to produce anxiety, and, in the absence of any stronger, conflicting desires, to cause wincing or moaning (Levin 2004).

Thus pain is characterized as a state having specific causes, leading to specific effects and being connected with other, specific states. This description reveals pain's functional or causal role.

One essential feature of functionalism in philosophy of mind is that it accounts perfectly well for the phenomenon of multiple realization. This is true for alethic functionalism as well. Just like the state of pain can be realized in different species by different (physical) properties that fulfill the pain-role, truth can be multiply realized in different discourses by

different properties that fulfill the truth-role. Truth, like pain, is a functional property.

A particularly handy way to show how truth could be given a functional description and to highlight the fact that truth could be rightfully conceived as a functional property is to appeal to the Ramsey/Lewis method of specification of the functional role of new theoretical terms. Let **A** designate the conjunction of all our platitudes about truth, exhibiting the interconnections between alethic concepts and between those and other, non-alethic concepts. **A** will have the following form:

$$\mathbf{A} (t_1, \dots, t_n, o_1, \dots, o_m),$$

where t_1, \dots, t_n stand for newly introduced theoretical terms (the alethic concepts), and o_1, \dots, o_m for any old term, regardless of its features.¹⁴ Given that the formula above is realized (that is, there are n "theoretic" entities and m "old" entities that stand in the relations described by the platitudes in **A**), we can construct the Ramsey sentence of **A** by replacing all the occurrences of the theoretical terms by variables and quantifying over them:

$$\mathbf{RA}: (\exists x_1) \dots (\exists x_n) \mathbf{A} (x_1, \dots, x_n, o_1, \dots, o_m)$$

Now, starting from **RA** we could give a functional definition of every new introduced theoretic term by dropping the existential quantifier preceding it. For example, let the term t_i stand for truth; its functional definition will be the following:

$$\mathbf{FDT}: t_i = \text{the } x_i \text{ is such that } (\exists x_1) \dots (\exists x_{i-1}) (\exists x_{i+1}) (\exists x_n) [\mathbf{A} (x_1, \dots, x_i, \dots, x_n, o_1, \dots, o_m)]$$

And this is how the truth-role is defined.¹⁵ With this definition in hand, we can construct the following schema:

¹⁴ Lewis (1983, 1991) distances himself from interpreting the O-terms as standing for "observational" terms. For him, O-terms are "all the old, original terms we understood before the theory was proposed ... If part of the story was mathematical ... then some of the O-terms will be mathematical. If the story says that something happened because of something else, then the O-terms will include the intensional connective 'because', or the operator 'it is a law that', or something of the sort" (Lewis 1991, 205).

¹⁵ I followed George Rey's exposition of "ramsification" (Rey 1997, 172 - 175), but I made a slight change: I preserved the O-terms (that is, the non-alethic terms) in the conjunction of platitudes **A** in order to highlight not only the interconnection between T-terms, but the connections between these and O-terms as well.

ST1: A proposition p is true iff p has a property that fulfills the truth-role.

However, ST1 is not spared from troubles. As such, ST1 says what it is for a proposition to be true – namely, that it has to have a property that plays the truth-role – but is silent about what truth is. We are forced here to make a “choice of interpretation”, as Lynch puts it. For ST1 could get us in the wrong direction if we construe it as saying that truth is *identical* to the (whatever) property that fulfills the truth-role (that is, the realizer). If this is the interpretation of ST1, we end up with several properties realizing the truth-role (each for every discourse) *being* truth. From here we get to the claim that there are several concepts of truth, and this is simply to fall back on the problems besetting strong alethic pluralism. We have to refuse to make the “theoretical identification” Lewis is after. Rather than identifying the functional property with its realizer – taking “true” as a non-rigid designator for the property that plays the truth-role, we have to take it as a rigid designator of the property of having the property of fulfilling the truth-role. Truth is the higher-order property of having a property that fulfills this role. Accordingly, ST1 would have to be revised as

ST2: A proposition p is true iff p has the property of having a property that fulfills the truth-role.

By understanding truth as a higher-order functional property that is multiply realizable, alethic functionalism seems to be the desired form of weak alethic pluralism that preserves the unity of the concept of truth and accounts for the differences in which propositions belonging to different discourses are (said to be) true.

Several objections to alethic functionalism have been raised. Here are some, accompanied by the functionalist’s answers:

QUESTION 1: How is alethic functionalism going to solve the problem of the preservation of truth within mixed inferences? Is alethic functionalism better in this respect than strong alethic pluralism?

ANSWER: Since truth, according to the alethic functionalist, is the property of having a property that fulfills the truth-role, what exactly realizes the truth role in a given discourse is not important in this context. The property of having a property that realizes the truth-role is preserved within mixed inferences, and this is enough.

QUESTION 2: How is alethic functionalism going to solve the problem of compositionality? If we have, say, a conjunction of two propositions that are true in different ways, what to say about the truth of the conjunction?

ANSWER: This problem is solved by applying the theory initially only to atomic propositions. The following schema would account for this:

STA: An atomic proposition p is true iff p has the property of having a property that fulfills the truth-role.

Further, the truth of a compound proposition is accounted for in the usual manner: as a truth-function of the atomic propositions of which it is composed. As in the case above, the truth of the conjunction is explained by the fact that both conjuncts are true, that is, they have the property of having a property that fulfills the truth-role.

QUESTION 3: Platitudes come in different shapes and shades. How is the alethic functionalist going to select the essential ones from all of them?

ANSWER: All platitudes are essential for the concept of truth, if platitudes are to be understood as what they are: platitudes. That is, nobody should count as platitudes claims belonging rather to the philosophical lore, as for example "truth is idealized assertability at the end of inquiry". Instead, claims like "it is good to believe what is true", "a true sentence cannot be false at the same time", "there are unknown truths" can be counted as platitudes much easier.¹⁶ Moreover, we should count as platitudes claims that are not explicitly held by the folk, that is, claims that people would endorse when faced with certain situations they never faced before, or claims that people ought to hold because they logically follow from explicitly held platitudes.

QUESTION 4: What determines the truth-role (that is, the platitudes about truth) might vary both in time and at the same time. That is, what passes as a platitude right now might not have done so in the past,

¹⁶ I'm not sure whether claims linking truth with correspondence should be counted as platitudes; their status is controversial. Lynch seems to exclude them from our common sense beliefs about truth; Crispin Wright allows them, but only if correspondence is taken in a minimal, non-metaphysical way. Yet, both authors accept instances of T-schema as platitudes.

and it seems legitimate to suppose that it might not do so in the future. Also, what counts as a platitude for some might not count as such for others. The question is then: how does alethic functionalism cope with those changes in the specification of truth-role? Accepting the changes might lead to an unwanted proliferation of functional concepts of truth, collapsing the distinction between weak and strong alethic pluralism.

ANSWER: It's true that the specification of truth-role changes in time and at the same time. But for alethic functionalism to work it isn't required that every fulfiller of the truth-role should realize *all* the platitudes that might be associated with the concept of truth. This allows for the possibility of changes in our specification of the truth-role without ruining the idea of truth being multiply realizable and without giving birth to an unwanted proliferation of truth-roles. Granted, there has to be a core of those platitudes that remains unchanged. But what this means is only that if none or just a very few of our current platitudes figure in the characterization of the truth-role, then legitimate doubts might be raised that it is really the concept of truth we are talking about.

These questions don't exhaust the problems for alethic pluralism, but they give us a pretty clear image of the view.

III

Two questions arise regarding alethic functionalism. The first is whether it is a powerful enough position to overcome important objections. The second is whether alethic functionalism is of any help to the relativist. The sequence of questions and answers in the end of the last chapter was meant to show that alethic pluralism is, indeed, a solid view. It is time now to see whether relativism can get any support from it.

It is usual to distinguish between two forms of relativism. Vertical relativism presupposes a hierarchy of autonomous discourses and is concerned with the issue of reducibility between those; it holds that discourses dealing with facts at an upper level cannot be reduced to more basic discourses dealing with facts at a lower level. Horizontal relativism presupposes that, within one and the same discourse, there are many perspectives, conceptual schemes or theories and it holds that all these are or could be right, adequate or true. Thus, whereas vertical relativism

is interested in what happens between levels of discourse, horizontal relativism is interested in what happens at the same level.¹⁷

Alethic functionalism is particularly suited for vertical relativism. The reason for this is that discourses play a very important role in determining what properties fulfill the truth-role. In describing alethic functionalism, the role of discourses was to bring some metaphysical constraints to bear upon what the realizer of the truth property could be. For example, if you are, say, a nonfactualist in ethics, the realizer of the truth role cannot be correspondence with ethical entities, since according to the nonfactualist there are no such entities. The metaphysical position one adopts vis-à-vis a given discourse determines the realizer of the truth-role for the discourse in question.

Now the question is whether there is something that makes it in principle impossible to apply alethic functionalism to horizontal relativism. The crucial point is to see what exactly is the scope of the metaphysical commitments one brings along in judging what is the proper realizer for the truth-role – what is the “alethic unit”, so to speak, those commitments are meant to apply to in order to select the realizer. By “alethic unit” I don’t mean the smallest item that can be truth-evaluated (namely, individual proposition) – though, on some views, this could be the alethic unit I’m talking about. Rather, I mean the more or less comprehensive items consisting of collections of propositions for which the realizer of the truth-role has to be determined, in such a way that to account for every individual proposition that belongs to the alethic unit chosen. Let’s make this clearer. Recall the discussion in section I about the goal of a truth-theory. In the long quotation from Blackburn I gave, there was reference to the view that a theory of truth has to account for the truth-conditions of every individual proposition. On this understanding of the goal of a theory of truth, the alethic unit is individuated as a very fine-grained one: it is the individual proposition. This pointed to a serious problem for the substantialist, for if we individuate the alethic unit *that* fine-grained, any chances for a substantivist (or, by the same token, for any kind of) theory of truth vanish. The retreat was then to take whole discourses as the alethic unit, acknowledging the fact that the realizer is the unifying factor (from the point of view of the theory of truth) for *all* propositions belonging to the discourse in question. The realizer is par-

¹⁷ Lynch (1998) calls these views vertical and horizontal pluralism. The issue is purely terminological.

ticularly suited for the discourse, and this is why every individual proposition is evaluated according to *that* realizer and not to another. For the monistic substantivist the retreat to discourses didn't sound good either, since on her view there is just one alethic unit, our whole cognitive activity. This is why alethic pluralism seemed to be a good choice, individuating the alethic unit as more coarse-grained than "propositionalism", but avoiding the unifying urge of monistic substantivism.

However, on a closer look we can see that the individuation of the alethic unit as coarse-grained as whole discourses is not exactly right. For what mattered in doing so were the metaphysical commitments one had. But what dictates (or guarantees) that those commitments have to be constant within whole discourses? Non-cognitivists, error-theorists or consequentialists in meta-ethics have different metaphysical views, but this will not push one to deny that their theories belong to the same discourse: meta-ethics; platonists, intuitionists or formalists in the philosophy of mathematics have totally different metaphysical commitments, but they do count as doing philosophy of mathematics, and so on. Of course, nothing impedes that different theories have the same metaphysical commitments, but this is not necessary. The simple possibility that theories belonging to the same discourse could avail themselves of divergent metaphysical underpinnings shows that alethic units must be theories, not entire discourses.

It is sensible to say that the difference between vertical and horizontal relativism comes down to the fact that the former takes discourses to be the alethic unit, whereas the latter takes the alethic unit to be theories. If this is so, then it seems that there is no principled reason of not applying alethic functionalism to horizontal relativism. This becomes much clearer when we see how it actually works.

So how is alethic functionalism supposed to apply to relativism? Consider two theories and two propositions, each belonging to one theory. Let's say that one proposition is the negation of the other: thus, p is a proposition belonging to theory₁ and $\neg p$ is a proposition belonging to theory₂. Further, let's grant that the concepts featuring in the two propositions have the same meaning. Is there any way in which both propositions could be said to be true? Since we conceived truth as a functional property, the only possible situation in which both propositions could be said to be true is when the realizers of the truth-role in the two theories are different. It isn't totally implausible that what realizes the truth-role

according to one theory makes p true, whereas what realizes the truth-role according to the other theory makes non- p true. But this plausibility has important consequences.

Take for example the proposition expressed by the sentence “The mind is the brain”. Suppose that this proposition belongs to a theory for which the realizer of the truth-role is some form of correspondence. Now suppose that the negation of this proposition, expressed by the sentence “The mind is not the brain” belongs to another theory for which the realizer of the truth-role is coherence. For the first theory, the sentence “The mind is the brain” is true because there is a fact, discovered by a team of neuropsychologists and materialistic-minded philosophers, that the mind is simply the brain, and not an immaterial substance, a multiply realizable functional structure or something else. For the second theory, the sentence “The mind is not the brain” is a consequence of some other sentences, expressing propositions that cohere perfectly well with each other and both with philosophical theses and empirical findings. So both our initial proposition and its negation are true, because of the different realizers of the truth-role that the metaphysical commitments of the two theories have determined.

The next step is quite simple. Since both propositions have a property that fulfills the truth-role, they are true in our functionalist sense: they have the property of having a property of fulfilling the truth-role. So, they are both true *tout court*.¹⁸

Note that in the situation described, all requirements in **GC** are met. Conditions (a) and (c) are fulfilled by stipulation. Condition (b), that the two propositions have to be judged according to the same understanding of truth is also fulfilled since truth is a functional property and, as we just saw, the two propositions were true according to this very understanding. With everything in place, we should conclude, in accordance with **GC**, that the two propositions contradict each other. And yet they are both true. So, it is possible for two contradictory propositions to be both true, and this is exactly what the relativist claims.

¹⁸ This doesn't contradict **ST2**. If a proposition has a specific property that fulfills the truth-role (say, correspondence), then it has the property of having a property that fulfills the truth-role. But the converse doesn't hold. If a proposition has the property of having a property that fulfills the truth-role, it does not follow that it has any specific property that fulfills the truth-role (in our case, correspondence).

Although this exemplification should not be taken as a straightforward argument for relativism, it clearly shows that our views about truth matter and that, if we accept alethic functionalism, relativism might come out as being true. However, things get more complicated when we introduce variation in the concepts' meanings. Nevertheless, I think this is a good start.

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