

# OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES TO THE RELATIVITY OF TRUTH

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In “Obstacles to the Relativity of Truth”, Tomáš Marvan aptly puts together the most important objections that have been raised to the doctrine that has witnessed perhaps the most impressive renaissance in contemporary philosophy: relativism. Marvan’s reaction is motivated by an increasing number of attempts to breed new life into the doctrine, attempts that have led to the necessity of reevaluating the old arguments directed on their predecessors.

Marvan focuses on and targets his observations towards a particular relativist view, namely truth-relativism. My aim in this paper is to sketch a version of truth-relativism that successfully overcomes the obstacles Marvan puts in the relativist’s way. However, the view I am going to sketch is not intended to fully address all of Marvan’s worries. In particular, I have no more than a few words to say about relativism in the factual domain (or fact-relativism, as it might be called), for I concur with his conclusion that the view is highly implausible. This might come rather as a disappointment, for Marvan stresses that he is most interested in such views, precisely because they are “particularly challenging, but also particularly afflicted with serious difficulties” (Marvan 2006, 440). Nevertheless, I think it is worthy to look at those domains to which contemporary truth-relativists apply the theory (domains that are more on the “subjective”, or “normative” side than on the factual side – see the list below) both because it gives us a useful model of how a relativist theory should look like and because it highlights the limitations of the doctrine.

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Marián Zouhar and Tomáš Marvan for helpful suggestions that increased the accuracy and coherence of the paper. Also, I need to acknowledge the financial help from the Slovak Academic Information Agency which awarded me a scholarship within The National Scholarship Programme of the Slovak Republic for the Support of Mobility of Students, PhD Students, University Teachers and Researchers for the academic year 2006 – 2007.

## **Formal aspects of the view**

Recently, truth-relativism has taken the form of a semantic account to be given to some specific areas of discourse. Among discourses amenable to relativistic treatment are those about future contingents, knowledge attributions, epistemic modals, gradeable adjectives, and discourses that exhibit the phenomenon known as “faultless disagreement” (basically, the evaluative domain). Other applications, not worked out yet, are seen as having good prospects to fit the truth-relativistic model.

The formal part of the theory is a slight modification of the traditional, Kaplanian framework. As it is widely known, in his work on indexicals Kaplan has put forward a model according to which in order to establish an utterance’s truth-value we need to follow two steps: first, to determine the content of the utterance in a given context; second, to evaluate that content with respect to the salient parameters. In the first step, the important notion is that of “context of utterance”, whereas for the second the crucial notion is that of “circumstance of evaluation”. This latter notion is what interests us here. A circumstance is defined as that with respect to which contents should be evaluated, and it “will usually include a possible state or history of the world, a time, and perhaps other features as well” (Kaplan 1989, 502).<sup>2</sup> For those utterances that don’t contain indexical expressions, containing instead only expressions whose semantic value does not change with context (expressions with fixed character, as Kaplan called them), the first step is superfluous, so it need not be performed. Nevertheless, in order to establish the truth-value of utterances containing such expressions, we do need to perform the second step: their truth-value is to be established by evaluating them with respect to suitable circumstances of evaluation.

The modification the relativist has to perform consists simply in introducing more parameters than the usual ones in the circumstances of

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis (1980), whose view differs in a number of ways from that of Kaplan, but for what we are interested now is quite similar to it, thinks of circumstances of evaluation (which he calls “indices”) as incorporating more parameters – an agent and a place (and possibly a standard of precision) in addition to a world and a time. I don’t want to commit to any view about what are the right parameters that must enter in the circumstances of evaluation. I will speak of “the usual parameters” to denote whatever parameters are included in the circumstances of evaluation – with the exception, of course, of those the relativist will introduce in order to account for the discourses to which she applies the theory (see below).

evaluation against which utterances have to be evaluated. The parameters that need to be introduced vary, of course, with the discourse to which the view is supposed to apply. Thus, a relativist about taste, for example, will claim that an utterance of the sentence “Avocado is tasty” needs to be evaluated against a standard of taste parameter (along with the usual parameters); a relativist about knowledge attributions will claim that an utterance of the sentence “Moore knows that he has hands” needs to be evaluated against a standard of knowledge parameter (again, along with the usual parameters). This is how it works for the other domains as well.

Now, to this modification the relativist has only to add the observation that the same utterance (or different, but with the same semantical value) might be true when evaluated with respect to a circumstance, but false when evaluated with respect to another circumstance. To give an example, an utterance like “Raising animals for food is wrong” is true when evaluated with respect to a circumstance containing as a parameter a moral standard according to which raising animals for food is wrong, but false when evaluated with respect to a circumstance containing as a parameter a moral standard that allows raising animals in order to fill our menus. Relativism could be then defined as the view that the same *proposition* (since it is propositions that are the semantic values of utterances) could be both true and false when evaluated with respect to different circumstances of evaluation. The formal apparatus briefly presented above allows the relativist to express his view in a way that does not require a radical departure from the traditional semantic framework.

### Stating the view

Given the multiplicity of views that breathe under the label “relativism”, authors discussing relativism in general felt the need to provide a unifying schema that captures what the view is essentially about. That schema then becomes the mark of any “true” version of relativism.<sup>3</sup> Marvan’s favorite choice for the schema that unites all trully relativist positions is the following:

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<sup>3</sup> Variants of such a unifying schema are offered in Haack (1996), Swoyer (2003), Kölbel (2004) – to cite just a few authors.

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

A quick look on the framework presented in the preceding section makes it clear that the position I advocate conforms to the schema (R). The only duty we have is to state clearly, as Marvan demands, what S is. Following several authors, Marvan chooses for S the term “perspective”. I have nothing in principle against using this term, but I think it still is in need of a clearcut definition. I will use instead the Kaplanian term “circumstance of evaluation”. As we have seen, a circumstance of evaluation is a set of parameters against which utterances from a given domain must be evaluated, the set varying with the domain in question. So we have a pretty clear grasp on what circumstances of evaluation are. I will refer to the other parameters from the circumstances of evaluation besides the usual ones with the term “standard”, which comprises both the evaluative and the normative realm (moral standards, aesthetic standards or knowledge standards will all be standards of this sort).

Marvan’s main purpose in his paper is to show that the schema (R) has no interpretation that would yield a coherent and intelligible position. In contrast, I will argue that the formal theory presented above provides just such an interpretation.

## The objections

### First obstacle: relative truths

Kaplan has defined truth-in-context as follows:

If  $c$  is a context, then an occurrence of  $\varphi$  in  $c$  is true iff the content expressed by  $\varphi$  in this context is true when evaluated with respect to the circumstance of the context (Kaplan 1989, 522).

For Kaplan,  $\varphi$  is a sentence containing indexical expressions. Now, the relativist might use the same definition of truth, taking  $\varphi$  to be a sentence comprising a term belonging to the target discourse (and maybe indexical expressions as well). Here is an example of how the truth of an utterance about the painting *Mona Lisa* should be defined:

(RT) If  $c$  is a context, then an occurrence of the sentence “*Mona Lisa* is beautiful” is true(s) iff the content expressed by “*Mona Lisa* is beautiful” is true in this context according to aesthetic standards.

Given this way of stating the truth of utterances, the relativist will say that *all* truths are relative – in the sense that they are relative to the circumstances of evaluation with respect to which utterances of those truths are evaluated. (In the example above I left out all the usual parameters, considering only the aesthetic standard. This is appropriate, since we are interested in the relativity of utterances from the aesthetic domain within one and the same world.) Yet, this claim is hardly surprising, for it rests on some fairly well entrenched views about how we evaluate certain types of utterances. It is a common-place in possible worlds semantics, for example, that contingent claims are true in some worlds, but not in others. In the jargon of the framework discussed, this amounts to saying that a given claim is true *with respect to* one world and false with respect to another. And although there is an ongoing debate regarding the semantics of temporal expressions, one of the consequences of temporalism is that time must be part of the circumstances of evaluation against which we evaluate utterances of tensed sentences. (Kaplan himself, as a temporalist, offers some arguments for this view.) So the idea that a given utterance is true with respect to circumstances comprising the usual parameters is quite common. What is uncommon is the relativist's claim that in order to account for the truth of utterances belonging to the target domain, we have to introduce additional parameters into the circumstances of evaluation. Besides this additional claim, the view is as close as possible to the orthodoxy in current semantics.

This is quite remote from the discussions about claims being absolutely or relatively true that Marvan surveys in his paper. But this might turn out to be a positive feature of the present view: the need to provide a principled way of distinguishing absolute truths from relative ones – a quite hard task for early relativists – does not even arise in this framework. *All truths are relative*, but in the innocuous and unexciting sense specified.

### **Second obstacle: sameness of content**

Marvan's second complaint is that relativists fall short of preserving the identity of a proposition through perspectives. This complaint is made in two kinds of cases: with respect to factual claims, like "Winston Churchill was born in Prague", and with respect to Gilbert Harman's moral relativism. In the first case, Marvan finds no way to make sense of the rela-

tivist's claim, whereas in the second he finds Harman's brand of relativism not worthy of its name.

I agree with Marvan's conclusion that Harman's view is not truly relativistic. Although things are not totally clear here, Harman's main claim seems to be that terms like "ought" mean different things when uttered by people having different moral outlooks.<sup>4</sup> The claim is that "[f]or the purposes of assigning objective truth-conditions, a judgment of the form, it would be morally wrong of P to D, has to be understood as *elliptical* for a judgment of the form, in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D" (Harman 1996, 43, my emphasis). Since moral frameworks vary, what the judgment is elliptical for has different contents in different contexts.<sup>5</sup> This is, in my view, a clear form of contextualism. Compare the view with contextualism in epistemology: according to people like David Lewis or Keith DeRose, the word "know" has different meaning depending on the context of its use: uttered in a philosophy class, where the knowledge standards are high, the sentence "Moore knows that he has hands" means one thing, whereas uttered in ordinary contexts (say, at the marketplace), where the knowledge standards are low, means something else. None of these claims is one that the relativist is committed to. Therefore, the failure of Harman's view does not have any bearing upon the relativist position *per se*.

There is an important issue in that connection, which Marvan brings out in a footnote. He claims that the "proposal in question [i.e., Harman's view] 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" (Marvan 2006, 5, fn. 17). However, this principle, as more than a couple of authors have suggested,<sup>6</sup> is clearly false. For a difference in truth value of two claims (utterances) does not necessarily lead to a difference in their content. It might be the case, as the relativist is eager to point out, that the two utterances are evaluated with respect to different circumstances of evalua-

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<sup>4</sup> In James Dreier's (1990) version of the view, called "speaker relativism", the same holds for terms like "good" or "bad", which behave like indexicals.

<sup>5</sup> Although he is careful to mention that the claim is not to be understood as implying that speakers *intend* to speak about or to refer to moral frameworks when making judgments of the form "it would be morally wrong of P to D".

<sup>6</sup> Cappelen and Lepore (2005), Predelli (2005), MacFarlane (forthcoming).

tion – in which case their content remains the same. It is the circumstances that are responsible for the difference in truth-value, and not the different content, which remains constant across evaluations.

However, the problem posed by Marvan is indeed one that is crucial for the relativist. For the problem with the contents the relativist evaluates with respect to circumstances of evaluation is that they might turn out not to be the kind of contents that are fully truth-evaluable. As it is known from the temporalism-eternalism debate, Frege opposed temporalism by claiming that tensed utterances must be first “completed” – that is, the time of the utterance must be part of the content they express in a given context. A similar objection might be raised in connection with other forms of relativism, to the effect that the contents the relativist claims to be relative to circumstances are not complete – they don’t express truth-evaluable contents. Another related worry is that the relativist’s contents, being incomplete, cannot be the appropriate objects for propositional attitudes. The relativist might thus be forced to postulate kinds of contents that do not overlap with what we usually think them to be: propositions. But this does not mean that the relativist is out of resources here: she might retort to “propositional functions” (Perry 1993), “relativized propositions” (Recanati, forthcoming a), “lektons” (Recanati, forthcoming b), and other sorts of relativizable contents. Although I cannot dwell on these matters here, I fully acknowledge the relativist’s duty to provide a theory of content that answers all the problems listed above.

Now, with respect to factual matters, Marvan says that a view holding that

[r]elative to a perspective *S*, the claim “Winston Churchill was born in Prague” is true; relative to (our) perspective *S'*, the same claim is false

is unintelligible, for there is no way in which we could make sense of this relativistic claim. On this score, I totally agree with Marvan. According to the theory presented, the only way to represent the claim’s relativity is to interpret *S* as circumstances of evaluation comprising only worlds. The result will be that “Winston Churchill was born in Prague” might be true at some worlds, but false at others (including ours). However, we are interested in what is the case in *one* world, the actual one. That means, as Marvan also stresses, that we have to capture the relativity by keeping the world “constant across different perspectives” (Marvan 2006, 446). We need, then, to introduce some other parameter in the circumstances of evaluation that will account for the relativity of the claim: something

like Kuhnian paradigms, or other kinds of “entities” along the same lines. However, the problem with those is that they are not likely to be the kind of “entities” that might enter in the circumstances of evaluation as parameters. For paradigms, as they are usually understood, have a bearing upon the truth-values of claims pertaining to them because these only apparently use the same concepts: what a word means in one paradigm is different from what it does in another. So the claim that “Winston Churchill was born in Prague” is not likely to have the same content across paradigms.<sup>7</sup>

### **Third obstacle: too many truths**

Marvan’s third and last objection to truth-relativism is that it leads to a proliferation of notions of truth. On this basis he criticizes Jack Meiland’s (1977) claim that the ordinary view of truth, as a two-term relation between a content and the world, must be abandoned and replaced by another conception of truth as a three-term relation between a content, the world and “perspective”.

Whether or not Meiland’s view of truth as a two-term relation between a content and the world indeed captures our ordinary way of thinking about truth, he is right in holding that truth must be conceived as a ternary relation. However, in our framework it is not “perspectives” that must be the third term in the three-term relation, but – as expected – circumstances of evaluation. Truth will be then a three-term relation between a content, a subject and a circumstance of evaluation. (The world, constituting one of the terms in Meiland’s three-term relation is now included into the circumstance as a parameter.) This comes out clearly in (RT) above, where the truth predicate is true(s) – truth at a circumstance of evaluation comprising the salient aesthetic standard (the usual parameters were left out for expository convenience). However, this is not such a revolutionary move as Meiland thought. For, as we have seen, the ternary view of truth is already established within traditional semantics. The relativist just adds the twist that the circumstances comprising the usual parameters must be supplemented by other, suitable parameters.

The issue that remains is the connection between the relativistic notion of truth and the ordinary one. Here the relativist must bite the bullet

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<sup>7</sup> I am not saying that a proposal along these lines is impossible to be forged; I’m just expressing skepticism with regard to its prospects.



and admit that the connection is not that tight. But he could also point out in her favor that even if the concept of truth as relativized to circumstances departs from our common-sense notion, it does not depart more radically than any notion of truth used in semantics does. Indeed, the concept of truth employed by semanticists must have at least some minimal connection with the ordinary notion. But it would be unreasonable to expect a full overlap here.<sup>8</sup> After all, they serve different purposes: one concept serves to ascribe truth in ordinary situations; the other is designed to be part of a full-fledged semantic theory. So, while conscious of the fact that the theory should yield results as close to those we usually get in our day-by-day practice of evaluating utterances of all sorts, we should nevertheless expect cases in which there is a divergence in results. One such divergence seems to appear in the case of relativism itself: even if, based on our intuitions, we see normal conversations as involving (or not involving) disagreement between the participants, the semantic apparatus employed by the relativist might yield results that contradict the intuitions we have.<sup>9</sup>

## Finale

Marvan ends his paper with a handful of advices for the relativist. It is always good to listen to good advice, but as far as the version of relativism put forward in this paper is concerned, the relativist need not worry. With the proviso mentioned in connection to fact-relativism, she could reassuringly check the remaining items on Marvan's list of tasks and then look forward with the confidence of someone who had just passed an important test.

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<sup>8</sup> For an illuminating discussion about, on one hand, the relationship between the inputs to the semantic apparatus ("the system") and what we usually think them to be, and, on the other hand, the outputs of the system and what we usually think them to be, see Predelli (2005).

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion about how relativism accounts for the intuitions we have in various cases of ordinary conversations about taste and moral matters, and a comparison between relativism and "indexicalism" on that score, see my (forthcoming).

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