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DISCUSSION

The Many Relativisms and the Question of Disagreement

Dan López de Sa

What different relativist claims about a given domain are to be distinguished? Which of them is best placed to account for intuitive facts about disagreement in that domain?

In a recent paper in this journal, ‘Indexical Relativism versus Genuine Relativism’ (2004), Max Kölbel distinguishes two forms of relativism, and argues that one of them, indexical relativism, faces problems in accounting for disagreement. In the first part of this discussion I present my own taxonomy of relativist positions in a given domain, which is based on David Lewis’s 1980 essay, and I compare it with Kölbel’s and other recent suggestions. In the second part, I argue that the presuppositional defence of indexical relativism against related objections that I have elaborated elsewhere¹ is also effective against Kölbel’s recent charges.

1 The Many Relativisms

What is relativism? Following the lead of Crispin Wright (2001) and others, I take *relativism* to be a claim to the effect that the appearances of *faultless disagreement* present in a certain domain are to be endorsed. These are appearances of contrasting variation in judgements about an issue in the domain that does not seem to involve fault in any of the participants – which in turn, as we will see, are manifested by intuitions about the contrasting truth-values some sentences should receive.² Such an endorsement of appearances involves, in one way or other, some relativity. And the different sources the relativity might be held to have are what gives rise to the different relativist views. In order to specify them further, some framework for representing the ways in which the truth of sentences depends on facts is required.

1.1 Index, Context, and Content

In recent decades, most people have been convinced that, in order to do this, a two-dimensional framework is required, of the sort advocated by

Kaplan, Lewis, and Stalnaker, among many others. Although recent discussion has made clear that the framework is susceptible to substantially different implementations and philosophical interpretations, I think that we can bracket many of these important issues here. In order to fix terminology and characterize the many relativisms, Lewis's version is in my view particularly illuminating. Here is a concise statement of it, from his 1980:

If a grammar is to do its jobs as part of a systematic restatement of our common knowledge about our practices of linguistic communication, it must assign semantic values that determine which sentences are true in which contexts. If the semantic values of sentences also serve to help determine the semantic values of larger sentences having the given sentence as constituent, then also the semantic values must determine how the truth of a sentence varies when certain features of context are shifted, one feature at a time.

Two sorts of dependence of truth on features of context are involved: *context-dependence* and *index-dependence*. A *context* is a location – time, place, and possible world – where a sentence is said. It has countless features, determined by the character of the location. An *index* is an n -tuple of features of context, but not necessarily features that go together in any possible context. Thus an index might consist of a speaker, a time before his birth, a world where he never lived at all, and so on. Since we are unlikely to think of all the features of context on which truth sometimes depends, and hence unlikely to construct adequately rich indices, we cannot get by without context-dependence as well as index-dependence. Since indices but not contexts can be shifted one feature at a time, we cannot get by without index-dependence as well as context-dependence. An assignment of semantic values must give us the relation: sentence s is true at context c at index i , where i need not be the index that gives the features of context c . Fortunately, an index used together with a context in this way need not give all the relevant features of context; only the shiftable features, that are much fewer.

(Lewis, 1980: pp. 21–2)

Following standard usage, one might call *contents* the relevant functions from indices to truth-values. The framework has it that sentences in conjunction with contexts determine contents, which, in turn, in conjunction with indices, determine truth-values. Given a context c , there is *the index of the context*, i_c , the index having the coordinates that match the features of c . Hence the basic two-dimensional relation can be abbreviated in the special case: sentence s is true at context c iff s is true at context c at index i_c .

1.2 The Views

For *moderate* relativisms, the relativity claims that account for faultless disagreement in a domain are expressible in this standard framework in its current form. Cases of apparent faultless disagreement can be seen as special cases of apparent contextual variation in truth-value. Consider one such: sentence s seems to be true at context c (at the index i_c), but seems to be false at c^* (at i_{c^*}). The non-relativist view on the matter would have it that such appearances must be deceptive, and explained away. I will call this *invariantism*. Moderate relativisms hold that it might in effect be the case that s is true at c but false at c^* . Hence the relativist straightforwardly accounts for the *faultlessness* of the judgements that could be expressed by using s at c but not at c^* – for the question of *disagreement*, see the discussion in the second part below. According to *indexical contextualism*, this is so in virtue of the content of s at c being different from that of s at c^* . According to *non-indexical contextualism*, the content of s at c is the same as at c^* , but it determines with respect to index i_c a different value than with respect to the different index i_{c^*} .

By contrast, *radical* relativism requires that the two-dimensional framework be replaced by a three-dimensional one. A sentence s at context c at

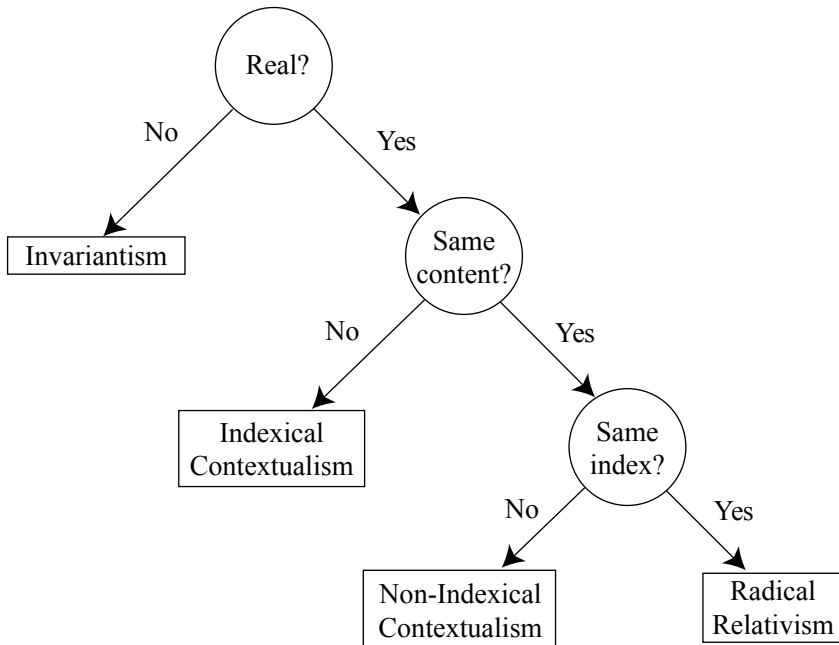


Figure 1: Apparent contextual variation of truth-value

index *i* can be true *from a certain perspective* but false from another. Perspectives are to be thought of as the same sort of thing as contexts, but representing a location from where a sentence, as said in a (possibly different) location, is viewed or assessed.³ Radical relativism is indeed an extremely radical claim, and it may be doubtful whether it is finally coherent.⁴ I am sympathetic to the suspicion that it might be not, but this will play no role here.

1.3 Kölbel's Indexical and Genuine Relativisms

Kölbel distinguishes two forms of relativism: indexical and genuine. According to him,

the two forms ... differ mainly in their diagnosis of the source of the relativity in question. Indexical relativists locate all relativity at the level of sentences, while genuine relativists claim that there is relativity also at the level of utterances and the contents or thoughts thereby expressed.

(Kölbel, 2004: p. 297)

I think that his indexical relativism corresponds straightforwardly to indexical contextualism. Here is his characterization:

Indexical relativists about, say, morality will hold that moral relativity is essentially a matter of moral sentences expressing different contents on different occasions of use. Moral sentences are thus very similar to indexical sentences in that the context of utterance determines which content is expressed by any utterance of them. Thus the same moral sentence can express one content and be true in one context of utterance, while it may express a different content and be false in another context.

(Kölbel, 2004: pp. 297–8)

In the remainder of this paper, I will use these two labels for the position interchangeably.

Things are more complicated regarding his genuine relativism. He characterizes the position, for the special case of morality, thus:

Unlike indexical relativists, genuine relativists locate relativity at the level of the content of thought and speech. ... Once the context of utterance has determined which content has been expressed, it still depends on a parameter whether that content is true. The parameter might be a moral code, a set of principles, a perspective, etc. For simplicity, let's

talk about relativity to perspectives. Genuine moral relativism, then, is the view that the contents expressed by utterances of moral sentences vary in truth-value from perspectives to perspectives.

(Kölbel, 2004: p. 306)

Is this non-indexical contextualism, radical relativism, or their disjunction? I contend the last, insofar as this characterization is concerned. Kölbel's perspectives, to which contents' truth-values are relative, might be merely (perhaps, non-traditional) further coordinates in the indices (i.e., besides possible worlds, and (perhaps) times, standards of precision, and so on), or they might instead be genuine perspectives as understood here: locations from where a given sentence as said in a location is viewed or assessed. If the former, the position would be that of the moderate non-indexical contextualist; if the latter, radical relativism proper. Insofar as the characterization does not settle this, the resulting characterized genuine relativism is either one or the other.⁵

What is important, insofar as the taxonomical issue is concerned, is to stress the following: the claim that particular contents – or *propositions*, in one understanding of them – require something more than possible worlds (and perhaps times, standards of precision, and so on) in order to receive truth-values is neutral with respect to, and hence conflates, substantially different relativist positions, moderate and radical.⁶

2 The Question of Disagreement

Regarding faultless disagreement, indexical relativism has it that it might in effect be the case that *s* is true at *c* but false at *c**, and this in virtue of the content of *s* at *c* being different from that of *s* at *c**. This straightforwardly accounts for the *faultlessness* of the judgements that could be expressed by using *s* at *c* but not at *c**. But, most critics contend, the intuitive facts about *disagreement*, as revealed by ordinary conversations in the domain, are jeopardized. Here is Crispin Wright's concise voicing of the worry:

If [indexical relativism] were right, there would be an analogy between disputes of inclinations and the 'dispute' between one who says 'I am tired' and her companion who replies, 'Well, I am not' (when what is at issue is one more museum visit). There are the materials here, perhaps, for a (further) disagreement but no disagreement has yet been expressed. But ordinary understanding already hears a disagreement between one who asserts that hurt-free infidelity is acceptable and one who asserts that it is not.

(Wright, 2001: p. 451)

In my view, Kölbel's claim to the effect that indexical relativism would 'distort the topic' of the relevant statements is an expression of a similar worry. In this part of the paper I first formulate the objection against indexical relativism in more detail, and then argue that my presuppositional defence is effective against it.

2.1 *The Objection*

According to Kölbel,

indexical relativism *does* introduce a substantial thesis about the *topic* of utterances of the type in question, a thesis that is in tension with what we would pre-theoretically suppose.

(2004: p. 304)

The notion of the *topic* of a statement employed here might be less than completely clear. He says that, according to indexical relativism, if you say 'Blair ought to go to war' you will be talking *about* (say) some moral code and what it requires, whereas, intuitively, you are just talking *about* Blair and what he ought to do: see his 2004: p. 303. This suggests that topics are to be understood as tracking intuitions concerning what statements talk about. Of course, as he himself seems to admit immediately, an indexical relativist would then simply respond that, according to her, you are indeed talking about Blair and what he ought to do: it is only that some feature of the context (the salient moral code or what have you) is relevant for the content your sentence has on the occasion.

Fortunately, Kölbel contends, 'the complaint that indexical relativists distort the topic can be given more substance' (2004: p. 303). The elaboration he offers makes it in essence a version of the worry alluded to above, to the effect that the position would not respect intuitive facts about disagreement:

Suppose you utter (B) ['Blair ought to go to war'] and I answer by uttering the negation of (B): 'It is not the case that Blair ought to go to war.' Suppose we are both sincere. According to [indexical relativism],⁷ we don't disagree any more than we do if you say 'I have a guinea-pig' and I answer 'I don't have a guinea-pig.' This, I believe, is counterintuitive and differs from the way we would usually conceive of the situation. Intuitively, we have contradicted one another.

(Kölbel, 2004: 304)

As he remarks, the intuition revealed is not (merely) that in those situations people are uttering sentences one of which is the negation of the other,

thereby perhaps commending different courses of action. The intuition is rather that people's words do indeed *contradict* each other.⁸ I take these to be in effect intuitive facts about disagreement, as revealed by ordinary conversations in the domain, which can be captured by the following:

GENUINE DISAGREEMENT In any ordinary, non-defective, conversation it is common ground that utterances of (say) '*a* is good' and '*a* is not good' would contradict each other

where '*a*' names a particular course of action.

So formulated, I think that GENUINE DISAGREEMENT indeed states hardly disputable facts, which the different relativisms and non-relativism alike should respect. I will understand the objection of the critics as having it that indexical relativism would jeopardize these intuitive facts of GENUINE DISAGREEMENT.

The objection, so understood, is a challenging one that the indexical relativist should indeed face. It is to be contrasted, however, with the different contention, sometimes also mentioned in recent discussions, that indexical relativism does not respect the following much stronger claim:

CONTRADICTION In any conceivable conversation whatsoever, it is indeed the case that utterances of (say) '*a* is good' and '*a* is not good' would contradict each other.

Of course, indexical relativism does not respect *this*. But unlike what I grant is the case regarding GENUINE DISAGREEMENT, there is no pressure to acknowledge that the alleged 'facts' stated in CONTRADICTION are indeed real. And, in any case, intuitions about disagreement as revealed by ordinary conversations in the domain, which are the ones critics allude to, obviously cannot be captured by something like CONTRADICTION, but rather by something along the lines of GENUINE DISAGREEMENT.

2.2 *The Presuppositional Account*

I conclude the paper by sketching why some versions of indexical relativism not only do not conflict with, but in fact provide an account of, the intuitive facts of GENUINE DISAGREEMENT.⁹

For the sake of vividness, let me consider an indexical relativist version of the Lewisian account of values that I myself would favour. The proposal includes the following element:

CONTENT '*a* is good' contributes to (whatever determines) the content of sentences containing it the property of being such that we are disposed to value it under appropriate reflective conditions

where *valuing* is the favourable attitude of desiring to desire, *we* are those disposed to value exactly like the speaker of the context (regarding the issue at stake), and *appropriate reflective conditions* are things of the sort of conditions of the fullest possible imaginative acquaintance with the object in question; see Lewis, 1989.

Clearly there could be contexts c , c^* such that ‘ a is good’ is true at c at i_c and false at c^* at i_{c^*} in virtue of the different contents determined by the different contributed properties, provided the different speakers are suitably differently disposed. Hence the indexical relativism of the position. Lewis considers essentially the same objection we are considering:

Wouldn't you hear them saying 'value for me and my mates' or 'value for the likes of you'? Wouldn't you think they'd stop arguing after one speaker says X is a value and the other says it isn't? – Not necessarily. They might always presuppose, with more or less confidence (well-founded or otherwise), that whatever relativity there is won't matter in *this* conversation.

(Lewis, 1989: p. 84)

The proposal, therefore, also contains the following component:

PRESUPPOSITION ‘is good’ triggers the presupposition that the addressees are like the speaker.¹⁰

Attention to PRESUPPOSITION shows why this version of indexical relativism accounts for the facts of GENUINE DISAGREEMENT nicely. In a nutshell: utterances of (say) ‘ a is good’ and ‘ a is not good’ could in effect not contradict each other, in virtue of their speakers being relevantly dissimilar (by CONTENT), but in ordinary, non-defective conversations participants would presuppose that they are all relevantly similar (by PRESUPPOSITION), and hence it will indeed be common ground in the conversation that utterances of (say) ‘ a is good’ and ‘ a is not good’ would contradict each other.¹¹

I conclude that indexical relativism – some versions of it, anyway – can indeed account for intuitive facts about disagreement as revealed by ordinary conversations in the domain.¹²

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Notes

- 1 See López de Sa, 2003.
- 2 My use of ‘faultless disagreement’ thus contrasts with Kölbel’s (2003) in that mine does not require that there be a single content or proposition which is

contrastingly judged. In my view, that apparent faultless disagreement is a basic *datum* for relativists and non-relativists alike and that all versions of relativism endorse the appearances of faultless disagreement are both true according to my use of the term, but not according to the alternative stronger sense. This will be particularly important for the discussion in the second part.

- 3 Thus 'perspectives' corresponds to MacFarlane's 'contexts of assessment': see his 2003 and 2005. I think that the present terminology helps to avoid confusion with '*context* of use/utterance' ('context' here) and, more importantly, with '*circumstance/point of evaluation*' ('index' here). On the latter, and on Kölbel's usage, see 1.3 below. The labels 'indexical' versus 'non-indexical' contextualisms are MacFarlane's. I elaborate on the virtues of this Lewisian way of characterizing the taxa in my 'The Many Relativisms: Index, Context, and Beyond' (in preparation).
- 4 That the coherence of the position is not something to be just taken for granted is also a contention of one of the main recent defenders of the view: MacFarlane devotes his 2005 precisely to arguing that it is conceivable that there be a language containing at least one such perspective-dependent (in his terms, *assessment-sensitive*) sentence.
- 5 In a footnote, Kölbel adds: 'One way of construing genuine relativism is to say that moral relativity is relativity to Kaplan's circumstances of evaluation. However, this presumably requires a view of circumstances of evaluation that is radically different from the usual view of circumstances of evaluation as possible worlds. Thus I prefer, for the moment, to introduce a separate form of relativity, namely to a perspective' (2004: p. 312, n. 14). Again, this modification could be either merely the addition of a (non-traditional) further feature of contexts to indices, or rather the radical modification of the nature of the latter, by making them tuples containing features both of contexts *and of perspectives*.
- 6 This – that talk of relative propositional-truth was by itself neutral between non-indexical contextualism and his relativism about truth (here: radical relativism) – was emphasized by MacFarlane in his 'Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths', presented at the recent LOGOS conference on Relativizing Utterance Truth in Barcelona (September 2005). See also his 2003: pp. 327–8 and 2005: 322–4.
- 7 In the original text, this is claimed for what for Kölbel is just one specific version of indexical version, which he labels *SIR*, according to which the relevant sentences in context have the same content as related sentences with explicit mention of the contextually relevant feature, which is held to involve the speaker. Thus Kölbel does not regard the objection as affecting *all* versions of indexical relativism. Besides *SIR*, he considers another view, labelled *HIR*, which modifies the former by contending that a relevant commonality between audience, speaker, and other conversationally relevant subjects is part of the *content* of the sentence in context. In my view, it is debatable whether *HIR* should be regarded as a version of indexical relativism at all, for reasons related to Kölbel's (2004: p. 305) consideration against *HIR*: given *HIR*'s requirement, in the relevant scenarios both contrastive judgements are indeterminate or false, and hence it is hard to see a sense in which they are faultless. The more sophisticated Lewisian version of indexical relativism considered below also crucially exploits such a commonality, but at the level of the presupposition triggered by, rather than the content of, the sentence in context. Thus the absence of commonality does not affect the sentence's content at the relevant context or, thereby, their truth-values.
- 8 That is, that if one sentence (in the conversation) is true, then the other (in that same conversation) is not. Kölbel offers the following alternative gloss: '[The

- sense in which we intuitively think that we contradict one another is that] we could not rationally accept what the other has asserted without changing our minds' (2004: p. 305). However, as he seems to acknowledge in a footnote to this (n. 11), making the proposal operative would require making subtle distinctions in the sense of phrases like 'accepting what has been said' and the rest.
- 9 For elaboration and further discussion, I refer the reader to my 2003.
 - 10 I assume here Stalnaker's account of speaker presuppositions and the derived notion of expressions triggering presuppositions. Here is a recent statement of his views: 'To accept a proposition is to treat it as true for some reason. One ignores, at least temporally, and perhaps in a limited context, the possibility that it is false. It is common ground that ϕ in a group if all members *accept* (for the purposes of the conversation) that ϕ , and all *believe* that all accept ϕ , and *believe* that all *believe* that all accept ϕ , etc. The speaker presuppositions [are] the speaker's beliefs about the common ground. A *nondefective* context is a context in which the participants' beliefs about the common ground are all correct. Equivalently, a nondefective context is one in which all of the parties to the conversation presuppose the same things' (Stalnaker, 2002: pp. 716–17). A given *expression* triggers a certain presupposition if an utterance of it would be infelicitous when the presupposition is not part of the common ground of the conversation (unless participants accommodate it, coming to presuppose it on the basis of the fact that the utterance has been produced).
 - 11 What if, for whatever reason, what it is common ground in a particular (conceivable) conversation is that participants are *not* disposed alike? Indexical relativism *would* be in trouble if in those situations people still used the unqualified predicates and we had intuitions to the effect that they would thereby be contradicting each other. This is an alternative way of understanding Kölbel's own example, given that participants are assumed to know each other's (different) 'moral codes': see Kölbel, 2004: p. 304. But again, unlike the cases considered in the text, there is indeed no pressure to acknowledge that there could be cases like these. See the related discussion of at the end of the preceding section.
 - 12 Many thanks to the members of Arché and LOGOS for many discussions on these issues. I am especially indebted to Max Kölbel, and also to Josep Corbí, Esa Díaz-León, Richard Dietz, Manuel García-Carpintero, Carrie Jenkins, John MacFarlane, Sebastiano Moruzzi, Crispin Wright, and Elia Zardini. Research has been funded by project HUM2004-05609-C02-01 (MEC) and grant EX2004-1159 (MEC).

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