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Invariantism *versus* Relativism about Truth

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Relative Truth, by M. GARCÍA-CARPINTERO AND M. KÖLBEL (EDS.), OXFORD, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008, 336 pp., 55.00 £

The book that has given rise to the exposition and discussion that follows is *Relative Truth* (*RT*, hereafter), edited by M. García-Carpintero and M. Kölbel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). That publication mainly originated from the conference *Relativizing Utterance Truth*, which – organised by the editors – took place in Barcelona in 2005; eight of the fourteen texts that make up the anthology come from works presented at the conference. So, relativism about truth is the theme that the book deals with, from within a conceptual and technical framework that is characteristic of contemporary semantic theories. In this context, the book is an excellent illustration of the most recent debates; it presents arguments in favour of and against relativism, formal-semantic theories in which to accommodate it and alternative theories. Here I briefly present and examine some of the philosophically relevant aspects of this question, in the light of the treatment they receive from different authors in *RT*. At the end, I include a proposal regarding the “open” future problem, based on the knowledge norm about assertions defended by Williamson.

I. VARIETIES OF PHILOSOPHICAL RELATIVISM

The idea of relative truth immediately takes us back to its most celebrated defender: Protagoras, as Plato depicts him in his work *Teaetetus*. The traditional position can be put simply thus: *all truth is relative*, and it is relative to the perspective of the different subjects who assess it (“man is the measure of all things”) and who may well differ in their assessment (without any one of these perspectives – it is implicitly assumed – being better than

any other). In terms that will bring us nearer to the ways in which current relativists pose the question: a certain characteristic, that of *being true*, which we thought could be monadically predicated of some things (propositions, sentences, or other similar candidates) in reality is a dyadic relation that also depends on an additional parameter; it can only be appropriately applied to an entity if that entity is complemented with the value that this parameter takes. Thus, a proposition, *p*, is not in itself true or false; rather it can be true *relative to* Socrates (or true *for* Socrates) and not true *relative to* Protagoras (or not true *for* Protagoras).

There are many differences between this conception and the theories considered in *RT*; but one in particular stands out. Traditional relativism is a *global* relativism: it claims that *all* truths are relative in the sense indicated. This extreme position is not supported by the relativists who develop and defend their theories in *RT*. Rather, they merely propose that there are specific restricted areas in which a relativist thesis similar to the one just set out is valid, without making any commitment to (or even explicitly rejecting) the general claim that all truth is relative. They support then, some version of what we could call *local relativism*. The areas in question usually include: evaluative appraisals (aesthetic; about – different – tastes; moral); certain types of epistemic sentences; assertions concerning contingent future events; sentences that contain vague expressions.

To continue establishing terminology, I will indistinctly use *absolutism* and *invariantism* (a term that has become popular more recently) to refer to the conception of truth that is opposed to truth relativism. An invariantist position can also be *local*, maintaining that truths in a certain domain are absolute, or at least embracing a commitment to the existence of absolute truths of some or other type; or it can be *global*, if it maintains that all truth is absolute. Under the common supposition that truths exist, global relativism enters into contradiction with the weak invariantism just formulated, and global invariantism contradicts any local relativist thesis.

One strong reason for rejecting global relativism is the classical argument that Plato offered a version of: whoever maintains such a thesis falls prey to some kind of dialectic incoherence or contradiction, as a result of applying that same thesis to precisely what it states. Thus, according to global relativism, to assert that *no truth is absolute* would be to assert something that, from some specific perspective, must be false. Therefore, such relativists are committed to the thesis that their philosophical doctrine is false and that there are absolute truths (they are committed, at least in the sense of admitting that the absolutist perspective – from which this consequence is derived – is just as valid as their own).

In *RT* there are hardly any references to global relativism or the possible responses to the self-refutation argument. One exception is in the chapter

by C. Wright (where – it seems to me – the most complex and interesting philosophical reflections in the book are to be found). Wright suggests that the self-refutation argument is flawed because it assumes that the invariantist can decide to choose an appropriate perspective that makes relativism false. In effect, the relativist doctrine does not entail that subjects have such a degree of choice; but I do not see that the self-refutation argument depends on this assumption.

It is also Wright who briefly mentions other sources from contemporary philosophy that have given rise to motivation for maintaining (local) relativist theses: antirealist metaphysics theories. However, neither is the antirealism of the second half of the 20th century (promoted, in different forms, by Dummett, Putnam and Wright himself) the main inspiration for the relativist proposals in *RT*; rather their inspiration is to be found in more markedly semantic considerations put forward in the last decade by authors such as Kölbel (2003), Lasersohn (2005), Récanati (2007), Richard (2004) and MacFarlane (2003).

2. 21ST-CENTURY RELATIVISM

It is common to prepare the ground for a presentation of the current relativist theories, such as the one that follows below, by first laying out cases that – it would seem – do not involve any interesting relativism, but which constitute an appropriate learning ground. This then allows us to move on to more interesting cases.¹

Let us consider declarative sentences such as ‘it is raining’ or ‘I am hungry’. These linguistic expressions are statements and, therefore, candidates to be truth bearers. Nevertheless, the truth or falsity of such sentences is not absolute, but rather it depends on certain additional factors that typically are provided by the context in which any one of them is used: where it is uttered (in the case of ‘it is raining’), who utters it (in the case of ‘I am hungry’) and the time at which it is uttered (in both cases). Clearly, although true assertions can be made using these statements, there are alternative values of some of the parameters (place, speaker, time) relative to which the assertion that results from the utterance would not be true, but false.

This much is obvious and – at least apparently – it is not particularly interesting from a theoretical point of view. A relativism that deserves our attention should be different on both these counts: it must combine an appropriate degree of *novelty* and of conceptual *interest*. (Therefore, since the concepts of novelty and interest are gradable, to a certain extent the relativism/invariantism distinction could also be gradable.) Relativism that is specifically *about truth* must also incorporate another feature, which I will now consider.

Let us suppose that somebody, even though they recognised that the “relativity” involved in ‘it is raining’ or ‘I am hungry’ is perfectly familiar and anodyne, still insisted that we have here a proof of relativism. An obvious response would occur to us immediately: precisely because of the dependence of such sentences on contextual factors, it is not appropriate to consider statements as truth bearers (except for eternal sentences, such as those typically used in mathematics). The *proposition* that is expressed or meant when a statement is uttered in a given context (or what could equally be termed the *propositional content*) certainly is an adequate truth bearer. Let us make the last point of this response explicit: the relativist thesis that *the same entity* is true relative to x but false relatively to y is false, because (if there really is a difference in truth-value) the proposition asserted when, for example, x utters ‘I am hungry’ is not identical to the proposition asserted when y utters ‘I am hungry’ (they differ, at least, with respect to who the speaker is or when the utterance is made).

Relativism (*about truth*) is characterised by the fact that it embraces the following idea. Even if we adequately individualise truth-value bearers in the way just laid out (considering propositions to be such), there are areas of discourse with respect to which truth is relative: where it depends on some other, additional parameter, whose different values are not fixed by determining the proposition expressed. The same propositional content (or the same proposition) can be true relative to one *perspective* but false relative to another. (‘Perspective’ is one of the most common and least misleading terms used to refer to the different values that the additional parameter in question can take; a parameter which – as we will see – is not unique, but rather varies according to the different areas for which relativist theses are proposed.) Let us now consider an example: ‘Homer Simpson is funny’ would express a unique propositional content, but that content (together with the facts) would not determine a unique truth-value; relative to a certain perspective (in this case a *standard* of taste with regards to what is funny) the content is true; but relative to another, it is false. Thus, with respect to an assertion that belongs to one of these areas, the relativists maintain two independent theses:

- (a) the assertion expresses a certain propositional content;
- (b) but that propositional content is not sufficient (together with the world) to determine the truth or falsity of the assertion, which also depends on the value that an additional parameter takes.

Such an approach allows us to glimpse a possible line of response, which here I will merely sketch and to which I will return in section V, since it constitutes a recurrent theme in *RT*. The objector can propose the follow-

ing: to the extent that there is any evidence in favour of (b) (about which we have said nothing so far), we have the theoretical option of interpreting it as evidence against (a). If additional factors (that are relevantly interesting and not obvious) really determine whether an assertion of ‘Homer Simpson is funny’ has one or other truth-value, we can always suppose that those factors also contribute to determining the propositional content, in such a way that two assertions resulting from the utterance that do not share their truth-value, do not share their content either. Thus, one avoids *truth* relativism, although at the cost of moving towards (assuming that the evidence in favour of (b) mentioned above does actually exist) a *content* relativism: assertions that apparently expressed the same content in fact express different contents, which depend on interesting and not obvious factors. (The terminology here is not uniform; sometimes those who affirm this type of *content relativism* are classified as *contextualists*.)

Truth relativists are perfectly aware of this reply. They usually postulate the existence of a certain phenomenon that would provide data that are simultaneously in favour of both ideas, (a) and (b): cases which – they claim – seem to involve what they call *faultless disagreement*. This supposes that two subjects (or the same subject at different times) disagree(s) about something (about whether Homer is funny, for example) without either of them committing any error or incorrectness. They only disagree if, as (a) claims, there is a common content. Furthermore, if neither of them is at fault, then it must be because, as (b) claims, whoever asserts ‘Homer Simpson is funny’ only speaks the truth relative to their perspective (and says something false relative to the perspective of the other person). Contemporary relativism has incorporated this idea of faultless disagreement as its main distinguishing feature and almost all the texts in *RT* argue about the presumed existence of cases that apparently can be classified in this category.

There are a few final things to consider before I present (in the next section) the evidence that it is usually claimed exists in favour of truth relativism. It is important not to confuse (nor to be confused about the relation between) two quite different questions; one of which is a formal-semantic matter – so to say – and the other, a more philosophical matter (which involves metaphysical, epistemological and also, of course, semantic questions). Put very schematically: (i) Can a formal-semantic theory be developed that is flexible enough to encompass truth relativism? (ii) Are there philosophical reasons (or any other type) that justify such relativism? Almost all the relativists writing in *RT* spend time tackling question (i), the technical question. The data seem clearly to lean in favour of a positive answer. The standard formal-semantic framework that is generally used as a contrast is provided by the analysis of the context dependence of different linguistic expressions as set out around 1975-1985 by writers such as Kaplan, Lewis and

Stalnaker. We find several different proposals and judgements concerning the extent to which a “*relativist*” formal-semantic theory is similar to or significantly differs from, such a framework. Naturally, a negative answer to (i) would be an important drawback if one wanted to give a positive answer to the philosophical question, (ii). However, a positive answer to (i) does not provide an answer to (ii). Therefore, the “*relativist*” formal-semantic theories, such as those that are described in certain detail in *RT*, do not in themselves require a commitment to relativism.² Most authors also consider the theme of (ii), concerning the theoretical reasons – philosophical or extra-philosophical – that we could have to support relativism. This is the subject that I consider to be more important and which I will keep addressing here.

III. SUPPOSED CASES OF APPARENT FAULTLESS DISAGREEMENT

Truth relativists often invoke cases like those I will describe here, claiming that they constitute evidence in favour of their theory since many people have the impression that the cases involve faultless disagreement. The relativists claim that standard semantic theories (not inspired by relativist theses about truth) do not allow for good explanations of such cases; the explanations that such theories would provide sometimes require certain independently plausible principles to be broken, as could be shown by other examples. However, it is in fact the case that many other people have the impression that these cases do *not* involve faultless disagreement (I will return to this question in later sections). Each one of the following examples is from *RT* or is directly inspired by one that appears there. Other relativist texts from the last decade contain cases that are wholly analogous.³

Gradable adjectives

Alice is discussing the height of basketball players. She knows that Bill is 1.85 m tall. She utters: ‘Bill is short’. In another context: Ben, with the same information on Bill, is discussing average height in Spain. He utters: ‘Bill is not short’.

Relativist description of the case:

Alice and Ben contradict each other about the same propositional content, expressed in either of the two contexts by ‘Bill is short’; but neither of them says anything that is false. The additional parameter or standard on which the truth depends in these cases would be a *reference class* given by the conversational context (the class consisting of basketball players, in one case; that consisting of Spanish adults, in the other).

The Alice-Ben case could easily be accommodated within a standard contextualist semantics. However, gradable terms represent a rather more serious problem, linked to variability regarding the question of where to draw the corresponding demarcation line (between those who are short and those who are not, in this case), even when the reference class has been determined (contextually or some other way). Let us suppose that both Alice and Ben take as the reference class Spanish adults; but Alice is a multimillionaire and Ben has no income. Sharing the data regarding Bill's economic situation, Alice says 'Bill is not rich' and Ben says 'Bill is rich'. Relativists such as Richard maintain that both utterances can be true, because the respective diverse perspectives (of Alice and Ben) are relevant [cf. García-Carpintero: *RT*, pp. 143-147].

Relativity of colouring

The leaves of a tree that were originally red have been painted green. In context C1, when faced with a photographer who is looking for something green for a photo, Pia utters 'The leaves are green'. In context C2, when faced with a botanist who wants to classify the tree, Pia utters 'The leaves are not green'.

Relativist description of the case:

The two utterances are correct. The relevant perspective (that contributes to determining the truth-value) could be the purpose with which the assertion is made [cf. Kölbel: *RT*, pp. 25-26; the example comes from Travis].

Sentences about tastes

Hannah utters: 'Homer Simpson is funny'. Sarah replies: 'That is not true. Homer Simpson is not funny'.

Relativist description of the case:

The truth-value of what is asserted in sentences like this is relative to a perspective, which consists of a standard regarding tastes of what is funny, or a specific sense of humour. Once again there is faultless disagreement.

Moral judgements

Arvind, in India, utters: 'One ought not to marry outside one's own caste'. Barbara, in Western Europe, utters: 'It's not the case that one ought not to marry outside one's own caste'.

Relativist description of the case:

There would also be faultless disagreement here. The truth or falsity of what is asserted can be relative to a moral perspective [cf. Kölbel: *RT*, pp. 24-25].

Knowledge attributions

At moment t , Charles judges that he has hands (in a normal perceptive situation). C1 is a normal conversational context. C2 is a different context in which someone raises the possibility that Charles is a handless brain in a vat tricked by a computer into thinking he has got feeling in his hands. Anna, in C1, asserts: ‘Charles knows (at t) that he has hands’. Anna, in C2, asserts: ‘Charles does not know (at t) that he has hands’.

Relativist description of the case:

Anna’s two assertions are contradictory, but true. *Contextualist* theories of knowledge cannot account for this fact. They propose, for example, that each conversational context provides the standard or level of epistemic warrant required for there to be knowledge, but in such a way that the implicit reference to such a standard forms part of what is said. Thus, Anna’s second assertion does not contradict the first, since the respective contents of each one are (those expressed by) ‘In accordance with the usual, low, epistemic standards, [those that pertain in C1], Charles knows (at t) that he has hands’ and ‘In accordance with high epistemic standards [those that pertain in C2], Charles does not know (at t) that he has hands’. This is a form of content relativism (cf. the previous section). But the intuition that Anna’s two assertions are contradictory is supported by the following: if someone said to Anna, in C2, that in C1 she had said the opposite, it would be natural (and appropriate) for her to reply by saying: ‘Yes, I did say that. But I was wrong’ [cf. Kölbel: *RT*, pp. 22-24]. The epistemic standard plays a different role, in accordance with *truth* relativism.

Modal expressions interpreted in an epistemic sense:

Anna wonders who has drunk the whisky that she was keeping. At t_1 she does not rule out that it may have been Barbara; she utters: ‘It might have been Barbara’. Later, at t_2 , she knows that it could not have been Barbara (she finds out that Barbara was nowhere near the place during the time interval in question); she utters: ‘It could not have been Barbara’.

Relativist description of the case:

These two assertions by Anna are also contradictory, but true. The situation is structurally similar to the previous one. The truth relativist shares with a potential content relativist (or contextualist) the following intuition: when a subject S asserts ‘It might have been that p ’ (using the modal expression in the epistemic sense) the assertion is true if and only if what S knows (when making the assertion) is compatible with p . However, the contextualist

would maintain that the different truth conditions corresponding to Anna's two assertions form part of the asserted contents, so that the respective contents of each one are (those expressed by): 'My current state of knowledge [at t_1] is compatible with it having been Barbara' and 'My current state of knowledge [at t_2] is not compatible with it having been Barbara'. The contextualist will maintain, therefore, that there is not one single content that Anna first claims to be true and later denies. However, the truth relativist maintains that it is indeed one and the same content, claiming the following: if someone were to say to Anna, at t_2 , that at t_1 she had said the opposite, it would be natural (and appropriate) for her to reply by saying: 'Yes, I did say that. But I was wrong. For it could not have been Barbara' [cf. Kölbel: *RT*, pp. 21-22].

Assertions about contingent futures

In 2009 Anna utters: 'Spain are the winners of the 2010 Football World Cup'. Someone utters, truthfully, in 2011: 'Spain are the winners of the 2010 Football World Cup'.

Relativist description of the case:

Leaving aside the complications that result from the different verb tenses, it seems that we have the same content being asserted both in 2009 and in 2011. On the other hand, in accordance with indeterminacy, the future is open for contingent events such as this (it is open before they occur). This means – according to the relativist – that if indeterminism is true, the assertion made in 2009 *as assessed from the temporal perspective of that moment* would have no truth-value, despite the fact that the assertion made in 2011 is true and the assertion made in 2009 is also true *as assessed from the temporal perspective of 2011*. (The faultless disagreement in this example is the one there would be between a person who says to Anna in 2009: 'Your assertion lacks a truth-value', and someone who says to her in 2011: 'Your assertion (of 2009) does not lack a truth-value') [cf. Kölbel: *RT*, pp. 27-30; MacFarlane: *RT*, pp. 81-102].

IV. MODERATE AND RADICAL RELATIVISM

It is frequently accepted a distinction between two versions of relativist views about truth, which Récanati has called *moderate* relativism and *radical* relativism. Relativists usually classified in the first group are Kölbel, Laser-son and Récanati himself. MacFarlane and Richard are radical relativists.⁴

As I have already pointed out, the relativist descriptions in the preceding section assume moderate relativism (with the exception of the case of

contingent futures). This means that the context in which the utterance takes place provides the perspective (the specific value of the relevant additional parameter) relative to which the propositional content asserted is true or false. Generally (though not always), the perspective determined by the context is that of the speaker (at the time and place of the utterance). Let us suppose that Hannah's and Sarah's tastes in humour (the relevant perspectives in this type of speech) are those that are reflected by the utterances indicated in the previous section. In that case, according to moderate relativism, Hannah's utterance when she says: 'Homer Simpson is funny', is *absolutely* true, since it is true relative to the relevant perspective (that of the speaker: Hannah). If Sarah were to utter the same sentence, her utterance would be *absolutely* false, since it would be false relative to the relevant perspective (that of Sarah). Thus, the specific utterances or assertions have a truth-value that is not relative, but which rather is absolute (since they incorporate the factors that determine the perspective). But the propositional contents asserted only have a truth-value relative to some or other perspective. The same view could be illustrated with the other cases.

The radical relativism defended by MacFarlane maintains that the relevant perspective is given by the context of *assessment*, or context of evaluation, of the utterance. Only relative to the perspective of the person who evaluates an assertion is that assertion true or false [cf. his contribution in *RT*, pp. 81-102]. This has philosophically important consequences. Continuing with the same illustration: the utterances of Hannah and Sarah (their utterances of 'Homer Simpson is funny') do not have an absolute truth-value. Let us suppose that Eve shares her tastes about what is funny with Sarah. Evaluated from Eve's perspective, both utterances are false. Naturally, the assertion that Eve could make by uttering 'the utterances of Hannah and Sarah are false' does not have an absolute truth-value either; its truth-value will depend on the person who assesses it (it is true relative to Eve; and false for those who share their sense of humour with Hannah). The other cases of relativity would receive an analogous treatment. Therefore, in those areas of speech that are subject to relativity, there are no absolute truths.

V. GENERAL OBJECTIONS TO RELATIVISM

In this section I will mention or schematically present some general criticisms of relativism that appear in *RT*, and which I tend to agree with. I will also develop a different reflection, related to the concept of faultless disagreement, which likewise aims to broaden the room for manoeuvre that non-relativists have available to them.

We find an argument specifically directed against moderate relativism concerning tastes in the contribution by Iacona. He defends a thesis (which I share) and which – in different ways – other authors (Cappelen, García-Carpintero, Rosenkranz) emphasise: both our pre-theoretical intuitions and the analysis offered by moderate relativism suggest that there are no cases of faultless disagreement: when it seems that there is disagreement, the impression that neither of the parties is at fault, loses force; also, when the possibility of attributing error to one or other subject becomes difficult, then it is not clear in what sense they are disagreeing. In addition, Iacona constructs a simple argument to show that if two subjects disagree on propositional content then one of them is wrong. He goes on to suggest – correctly, in my view – that the alleged intuition in favour of the existence of cases of faultless disagreement are weaker than the intuitions that support the principles and the logic used in his argument [cf. *RT*, pp. 287-288 and 290-291].

The book contains various criticisms that limit their scope to radical relativism. Wright argues that radical relativism (in accordance with the most straightforward way to interpret it, according to which the contrasting perspectives coexist in the world) has an unacceptable consequence: it excludes the representationality of the propositional contents concerned [cf. *RT*, pp. 168-176]. He also objects to the evidential role that the relativists attribute to the linguistic data [*RT*, pp. 177-182]. Finally, he indicates a possible problem of incoherence in the radical relativist position concerning the “open” future [*RT*, pp. 182-184]. For his part, Moruzzi argues that in MacFarlane’s theory disagreements about tastes are inexplicable, particularly if the different parties embrace radical relativism [cf. *RT*, pp. 218-222].

From the criticisms that only affect radical relativism, I would like to highlight two, inspired by remarks found in Evans (1985), and elaborated in their respective contributions by Récanati and García-Carpintero. They appeal – explicitly or tacitly – to a norm that it seems reasonable to suppose governs assertions, the truth norm: it is correct to assert something only if the assertion is true. (The *correctness* involved here is not the same as the truth – if it were, the norm would be a straightforward tautology – but it demonstrates the normative dimension of the concept of truth.) The underlying idea is that the correctness or incorrectness of a particular action (specifically, of making a certain assertion) cannot be unstable; it cannot depend on the passage of time or the changeable evaluative perspective of subjects totally alien to the agent; but that is precisely what radical relativism leads to [cf. Récanati: *RT*, pp. 44-45]. To put it in a different way: when I perform an action, I take on a certain responsibility; given the truth norm, when I assert something, I assume responsibility for the truth of my assertion; but it would be impossible to take on that type of responsibility if the truth-value of the assertion varied

according to circumstances that were so far from my control [cf. García-Carpintero: *RT*, pp. 141-142].

The objections raised by Récanati and García-Carpintero share with the first of Wright's criticisms mentioned in the previous paragraph the following: they affirm the absolute character of truth (in the sense rejected by radical relativism) on the grounds of intuitions about the absolute character of some other notion (representational properties; the correctness or incorrectness of actions). A slight worry about the dialectic strategy they follow is this: it is not clear that our intuitions about the absolute character of truth (in the indicated sense) are any less robust than the other intuitions these authors appeal to. (Furthermore, the Evans–Récanati–García-Carpintero strategy also relies on the truth norm.) Despite this worry, the strategy is appropriate for those who are inclined to consider that those other intuitions are more robust; and it is interesting and insightful – for everyone – since it points to such connections between the different concepts.

The truth norm is also relevant when it comes to evaluating the role that relativists (including moderates) assign to faultless disagreement. There is a risk of reasoning fallaciously when this concept is used in favour of relativism *about truth*. The disagreement that would be relevant to this question is disagreement *without falsehood*. It is controversial whether falsehood always supposes some kind of fault. The notion of fault does not appear to be merely normative, but rather it also seems to suggest a specifically moral dimension: a fault is something that a subject could be *blamed for*. This subtlety is sometimes exploited when cases of supposed faultless disagreement are constructed: we may intuitively be inclined to consider fault-free subjects who, notwithstanding, assert something that is false.⁵ It is an error to suppose that the truth norm does not allow for this possibility. According to the norm, to utter a falsehood is to do something that is incorrect. But the correct/incorrect distinction is more general. It can also be applied to cases where the possible incorrectness does not imply any blame (for example, when a biological organism does not function correctly). A hypothetical epistemologically ideal subject who is justified in believing a specific falsehood (and who is justified in believing that that belief constitutes knowledge) breaks the truth norm if she asserts that falsehood; but it is not clear that she is committing a fault for which she could be blamed.⁶

VI. ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS OF THE DATA

A different line of opposition to the relativists consists of opposing their hypothesis that the controversial cases that they set out are not satisfactorily explained by alternative theories. In this section we will see a general strategy

of this type, together with specific suggestions about some cases which – according to my criterion – are all linked to epistemological questions; the suggestions include a proposal concerning the “open” future that is different from those contemplated in *RT*.

Contextualism (content relativism) versus truth relativism

In section II above I anticipated the core of this strategy, which in general can be applied when faced with any supposedly problematic case. Wright explicitly states this possible line of resistance against relativism [cf. *RT*, pp. 163-165]. Cappelen develops it in detail, indicating that a “relativist” semantics is unnecessary because non-relativist (about truth) theorists, both contextualists and invariantists, can also explain all the cases by incorporating certain independently plausible semantic and pragmatic suppositions [cf. *RT*, pp. 265-284; cf. also Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009]. Let *U* and *U'* be two utterances whose truth-value is not coincident, and to which a relativist theory attributes the same propositional content. The Wright-Cappelen thesis claims that it is always theoretically feasible to avoid such an attribution; our semantic theory can always propose that the supposed level of “content” shared by *U* and *U'* is not really the relevant propositional content (with respect to which they differ).

According to Cappelen, his position is less revisionist than truth relativism. It certainly seems to be a constitutive (defining) feature of the notion of proposition (propositional content should not be anything else) that it has an absolute truth-value (or – in any case – one that is only relativised to a possible world or situation, if we wish to describe things in this way and we then consider the propositions as entities that are extensionally equivalent to functions that attribute a truth-value to each possible world).

However, the opponent points out that it is convenient to postulate a level of propositional content that does not share this feature. The disagreement is not (entirely) terminological: the opponent’s objection is also based on other features that are essential to the concept of proposition. Propositions are the contents of the mental states that we attribute to people. This is a dual theoretical role (as Récanati indicates, citing McGinn; cf. *RT*, pp. 53-54): on the one hand, it leads us to see propositions as truth conditions (the absolutist conception: together with the way things are, the truth-value is determined); but on the other hand, it is crucially linked to the causal explanation of behaviour (and of the connections with other mental states of the subject), leading thereby in a different direction. The novelty and philosophical importance of the theoretical proposals about indexical expressions that were advocated a few decades ago by Kaplan, Perry and Lewis (who, with hindsight, are sometimes seen as precursors of the current truth relativism) was not to be found

so much in describing how the truth-values of sentences with indexical expressions depended on the context, but more in suggesting, for example, that in order to appropriately classify conducts that were relevantly similar, we need a level of propositional content that is *common* to the different uses of ‘I am hungry’ (independently of the labels used to refer to it).⁷ The current truth relativists propose extending these considerations to the other cases that they usually set out.

I believe, in any case, that a criticism frequently raised by some moderate relativists against postulating faultless disagreement is correct. The shared content suggested by these (Kaplan-Lewis) reflections and similar reflections on the remaining cases does not seem to be something about which different subjects can *disagree* strictly speaking (it is not something that the subjects can get into an embroiled theoretical argument about).⁸

Knowledge attributions

From my point of view, the majority of the most important epistemologists adopt – or would adopt – an invariantist position with respect to Charles’ example.⁹ Thus, I reject the idea that truth relativism and contextualism (content relativism) are –in this area– the two basic rival options [cf. Kölbel: *RT*, p. 4].¹⁰ As regards the specific debate between truth relativists and contextualists, some versions of contextualism can reject the assumption (included in the relativist description of the case) that it is to be expected (and appropriate) that Anna, in C2, retrospectively considers that in C1 she was mistaken.

Modal expressions interpreted in an epistemic sense

The relativist description of this case attributes to Anna in the second context, at t_2 , a reaction that is analogous to the one she had in the previous example: expressing that at t_1 she was mistaken. In this case, our pre-theoretical intuitions support the idea that this reaction is to be expected (and apparently is appropriate). However, (both in Charles’ preceding example about hands, and in this one about the missing whisky) the relativist could be incoherent if she accepts – as seems to be suggested – that Anna’s retraction is appropriate when she says ‘I was wrong’ [for a similar criticism, cf. Wright: *RT*, note 28].

In general terms, the pluralist invariantist approach to this type of sentences that Dietz proposes in his contribution [*RT*, pp. 239-262] seems to me to be less problematic than the relativist options. Such an approach could be combined with assigning to such sentences a partially non-factual meaning (as other authors cited by Dietz suggest: Sainsbury, Swanson).

Ignorance about some contingent futures

Two different possible motivations can be glimpsed for believing that there is a philosophical problem here. The first, more metaphysical, is derived – in my opinion – from an obscure doctrine about possible worlds, which assigns them an extra level of existence in addition to that assigned to them by the ultrarealism of D. Lewis (in such a way that statements such as ‘there is a possible world where p ’ are given a meaning that is peculiarly different from that of ‘it could be the case that p ’). According to my preferred conception of modality (which it is not feasible to justify here) such a doctrine is confused and mistaken [cf. Pérez Otero 2010].

Regarding the supposed links between determinism, as a metaphysical thesis, and the present controversy, Kölbel claims that: (a) semantics should not settle the metaphysical question about the truth or falsity of determinism [RT, p. 28]. I agree with him on that. However, he combines this idea with an additional claim: (b) indeterminism requires that Anna’s utterance, ‘Spain are the winners of the 2010 Football World Cup’, at least when made, in 2009, was not true; and from these two claims he concludes: (c) the indeterminacy in truth-value of such an utterance should at least be an open option within our semantic framework. It is reasonable to conclude (c) given (a) and (b); but two considerations are fitting: one concerning (b) and the other concerning the limited scope of (c). I do not see what justification there can be in favour of (b); the requirements imposed by indeterminism (under other suppositions that I would agree with) on the case in hand are such things as the truth of ‘Spain may not win the Cup’ or the falsity of ‘Necessarily, Spain will win the Cup’. In relation to (c), a semantic theory that *allows* indeterminacy in the truth-value of that utterance will be a “relativist” theory in the sense mentioned at the end of section II above; which itself makes no commitment to – nor would it establish – truth relativism.

The other motivation has a more solid base. It corresponds to the intuition that in the situations that are usually presented as cases of an “open” future (such as that of Anna’s utterance in 2009) the subject’s assertion is not correct. I share this intuition with the relativists, but the incorrectness of an assertion does not imply that it is false, because the truth norm does not have the form of a bi-conditional (cf. the previous section).¹¹ We avoid placing the law of excluded middle at risk if we recognise that the assertion was true and we postulate that its incorrectness was derived from breaking another norm about assertions: the *knowledge* norm (proposed and defended in Williamson 1996), which states that it is correct to assert that p only if you know that p (obviously, this norm rules out the bi-conditional version of the truth norm). My hypothesis is that those cases of a contingent future that generate the worries are the same as the cases in which the subject does not know the fu-

ture. This hypothesis supports the epistemic explanation of the problem about the “open” future that I have proposed (which at the same time supports the plausibility of the knowledge norm).*

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NOTES

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¹ From here on I limit my comments to the relativist theories discussed in *RT*; by the term ‘relativism’ and its derivatives I will refer to local relativist theses.

² If relativism is correct, a suitable “*relativist*” formal-semantic theory will allow us to make the distinctions and classifications that the relativists say must be made. If it is incorrect, there will be no such distinctions and classification; in this case, the “*relativist*” formal-semantic theory is not literally refuted (that is why that theory is *not* a *relativist* theory), although it has been developed with the idea of allowing such distinctions and classifications. Analogy: the sense in which a formal-semantic theory that belongs to modal logic is not literally committed to the existence of necessary truths (in addition to the truths of standard, non-modal, logic that non-modal systems already allow us to classify as such).

³ In order to simplify the presentation, the relativist descriptions given correspond (except in the last case, concerning the “open” future) to what is usually classified as *moderate* relativism, in contrast to *radical* relativism. Cf. the next section.

⁴ MacFarlane uses ‘non-indexical contextualism’ and ‘relativism’ to refer, respectively, to moderate relativism and radical relativism. I do not have space here to go into the reasons behind this terminological difference, which is related to some of the points I mention in the next section [cf. Wright: *RT*, notes 8 and 20].

⁵ Einheuser lays out her relativist position using the expression ‘blameless disagreement’ instead of the usual ‘faultless disagreement’ (and assumes that the supposed phenomenon exists) [cf. *RT*, p. 188]. This makes the risks that I am pointing out much more clear.

⁶ Kölbel, however, assumes that being *fault free* implies being correct [*RT*, pp. 10-11].

⁷ Cf., especially, Kaplan (1989) and Lewis (1980). The text by Récanati is very enlightening in its exposition of this question; cf. his illustration based on Barwise’s example about Holmes and Watson. Let us consider another example, taken from cin-

ema fiction. In the film *Inception*, Leo plants the “idea” (the propositional content) approximately corresponding to ‘All of this is just a dream’ in his wife Marion. The similarity between Marion’s subsequent actions (attempts to wake herself up) would be explained because she believes *that same* propositional content; content that, however, lacks absolute truth conditions: the difference in the truth-value of that content in the same possible world *but in different contexts* (depending on whether or not Marion is dreaming) contributes to vital differences in the results of such actions.

⁸ There is a lasting impression that part of the debate between such content contextualism and moderate truth relativism (or between different versions of each option) reveals discrepancies that are merely verbal [cf. García-Carpintero: *RT*, notes 11 and 15]. As regards radical relativism and its detractors (including moderate relativists), it seems clear that the controversy is more substantial.

⁹ Assessing the different invariantist analyses of this case would take us away from our main concern here and would require much more space.

¹⁰ I also believe that the non-cognitivist positions regarding tastes and (if we were to rule out invariantism) regarding ethics, are better situated than seems to be assumed in *RT*.

¹¹ Rosenkranz seems to be committed to the bi-conditional version of this norm, attributing it to Frege [cf. *RT*, pp. 225-226 and 228].

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RESUMEN

Describo y examino algunas cuestiones filosóficas involucradas en los debates recientes acerca del relativismo sobre la verdad y las concepciones rivales, el contextualismo y el invariantismo, abordados en el volumen *Relative Truth* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Propongo, específicamente, una solución invariantista al problema del futuro “abierto”, que invoca la regla del conocimiento sobre las aseveraciones defendida por Williamson.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *contenido proposicional; aseveración; conocimiento; normatividad.*

ABSTRACT

I describe and examine some philosophical issues involved in the recent debates about truth relativism and the rival views, contextualism and invariantism, considered in the volume *Relative Truth* (Oxford University Press, 2008). I advance, specifically, an invariantist solution to the “open” future problem, which appeals to Williamson’s knowledge rule for assertions.

KEYWORDS: *Propositional Content; Assertion; Knowledge; Normativity.*