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Abstract

In this paper I present relativism (as found in John MacFarlane's work) using 2-dimensional propositional matrices and other tools from philosophical semantics. I also identify some of the key features of relativism and closely related theories, distinguishing relativism from contextualism and nonindexical contextualism (moderate relativism). Next, I discuss the problem of disagreement, and the problem facing the relativist who tries to capture genuine disagreement. Finally, I gesture at my preferred view, that the sentences under consideration are 'assessment indexical', and provide an insight into its possible mechanics.

On the Sensitivity of What is Said (and Heard)

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Abstract

In this paper I present relativism (as found in John MacFarlane's work) using 2-dimensional propositional matrices and other tools from philosophical semantics. I also identify some of the key features of relativism and closely related theories, distinguishing relativism from contextualism and nonindexical contextualism (moderate relativism). Next, I discuss the problem of disagreement, and the problem facing the relativist who tries to capture genuine disagreement. Finally, I gesture at my preferred view, that the sentences under consideration are 'assessment indexical', and provide an insight into its possible mechanics.

Recently, relativism about truth has come into vogue in the philosophy of language. In particular, authors like John MacFarlane have elaborated on traditional relativist themes to solve problems in subjectivist semantics. In what follows I will present MacFarlane's relativist semantics and examine the common intuition that relativism can't account for genuine disagreement. In closing, I will mention another possible position that is often ignored in the literature.

Contemporary relativists attempt to accommodate a particular intuition that I will call 'Variance':

Variance: The same sentence may have different truth-values in different contexts.

Mundane examples of Variance are sentences like 'I am hungry' or 'It is raining here,' which may vary in truth-value depending on who or what place is being talked about. Sentences that change in truth-value are called *context sensitive*. Context sensitive sentences may be used in different contexts to express different propositions (more generally, different semantic contents). These mundane examples are uncontroversial since it is clear that words like 'I' or 'here' vary in their reference.

Subjective matters also seem to lend to context sensitivity. If I find the Mona Lisa beautiful, it seems that I may truly utter 'the Mona Lisa is beautiful' and my Philistine friend may also truly utter 'the Mona Lisa is not beautiful.' Contextualism, a contemporary approach to more controversial cases of Variance, explains the shifting truth-value of these sentences by positing changes in content between the assertions. On one possible contextualist view, my utterance expressed the proposition that *I* find the Mona Lisa beautiful, while my Philistine friend's utterance expressed the proposition that *he* does not find the Mona Lisa beautiful. But if this is so, then he and I were wrong to think we disagreed, since I speak only of my own taste and he of his; it does not seem that the truth of my utterance implies the falsity of his, a basic (if inadequate) test for disagreement.

Relativism addresses this problem of lost disagreement by varying truth-value without varying the proposition expressed. Instead of comparing a proposition to a world to determine a truth-value, the relativist compares the proposition to a world plus another parameter, for instance a standard of taste. A relativist like MacFarlane might argue that my Philistine friend denied exactly what I said about the Mona Lisa, and that my assertion is only accurate relative to me — in other words, my friend and I may both be right, at least from a “higher,” metasemantic, perspective (since from *my* perspective, my friend is wrong).

It is not initially clear that relativism can make sense of disagreement. In its simple form, which defines nonindexical contextualism (moderate relativism) it clearly cannot:

NI: Proposition p is true as used at context of utterance $c(u)$ iff p is true at $\{W[c(u)], S[c(u)]\}$, where $W[c(u)]$ is the world of $c(u)$ and $S[c(u)]$ is the speaker's relevant standard in $c(u)$.

NI defines nonindexical contextualism, the view that the truth of a proposition concerning a subjective matter varies with the taste of the asserter of the proposition. Nonindexical contextualism differs from other contextualist views, like the one mentioned above, because the proposition expressed by each assertion remains constant, only the relevant circumstance of evaluation changes. Recanati (2008) defends this view under the title ‘moderate relativism’; however, as MacFarlane notes, there is no more disagreement on this account than there is between assertions of ‘It is raining’ across times or worlds. So, MacFarlane includes another index:

R: Proposition p is true as used at context of utterance $c(u)$ and assessed from context of assessment $c(a)$ iff p is true at $\{W[c(u)], S[c(a)]\}$, where $W[c(u)]$ is the world of $c(u)$ and $S[c(a)]$ is the assessor's relevant standard in $c(a)$.

MacFarlane claims that *R* defines ‘assessment sensitivity,’ the view that the truth-value of certain propositions (and the accuracy of assertions) can change with the assessor (I’ll assume for this paper that an assertion is accurate only if it expresses a true proposition).

But what is a context of utterance, or a context of assessment, and how do they come apart? In order to unpack the definitions above, I need to present some of the tools of philosophical semantics, mostly following Kaplan (1989). These tools prove useful in distinguishing relativism, contextualism, and nonindexical contextualism in ways previously unappreciated. It will be seen that contextualism and relativism are intimately related, to the extent that every contextualist reading may be transformed into a relativist reading.¹

Broadly speaking, languages are made up of meaningful expressions, some of which are sentences and noun or verb phrases. Expressions are evaluated with respect to circumstances of evaluation, which for most purposes are a world or an ordered pair of a world and a time, though they may be more finely individuated. To evaluate an expression is to assign it an extension. Predicates have a set as their extension, the set of all things that satisfy the predicate. Sentences have truth-values as their extension.² The inclusion of circumstances of evaluation is insufficient to do semantics because sentences may express different propositions in different contexts, as noted above. Kaplan's example draws this out: ‘I

am here now' will be true as uttered by anyone in any context, and so seems to be necessarily true. But it is not necessarily true that I am here now, since I might have been somewhere else. I will follow Kaplan in calling terms like 'I' and 'here' *indexical*. To account for these terms we need a second index, a context of utterance.

For our purposes, a context of utterance is a situation combined with a designated n-tuple (for the purposes of semantics) filled with whatever roles are demanded by the expression in question. For instance, 'I am here now' requires a 3-tuple of agent, place, and time. 'I am the queen of France' requires an agent or an agent and time, if you like (I won't address time here). The context of utterance plays a distinct role, but may double as the circumstance when appropriate, for example if we wish to know if an assertion was accurate where and when it was made.

Using this 2-dimensional system of contexts and circumstances we can construct the following example of a propositional matrix for the indexical sentence 'I am president of the United States.' The matrix below demonstrates the process of fixing the referent of 'I' with respect to a context, and then assigning a truth-value corresponding to whether or not the referent of 'I' is the president in the circumstance of evaluation (here the column labels indicate worlds in which different men won). The first row is labeled 'Obama Speaks' and so indicates a context in which Obama utters 'I am President of the United States.' What he said in his utterance is true in the first world, but false in the second two worlds. Notice that the reference of the definite description 'President of the United States' *does* vary with the circumstance, since the context of utterance is only used to fix the referent of indexicals.

'I am the President of the United States'

<i>Indexical Matrix</i>	Obama Won	McCain Won	Paul Won
Obama Speaks	T	F	F
McCain Speaks	F	T	F
Paul Speaks	F	F	T

We are now in a position to define a relativist view as one that implies column variation in these matrices when world and time are held fixed. There are a couple steps to make this precise. First, we choose a set of possible worlds across which the assessors of a subjective matter have constant tastes, a condition met when the assessors have the same standards in each possible world and the qualities of the relevant object or event remain constant. Then we choose a subset that contains worlds in which each of the assessors in turn utters the sentence under consideration.³ Within this subset, the contextualist reading of the sentence uttered will yield necessarily equivalent columns but possibly varied rows, since the content of the sentence will vary with the speaker but the facts do not.

Take the following example: Together at a meal, Alice and Joan find dinner delicious but Susan does not. Let the row labels of the following matrix indicate each speaking the sentence 'Dinner is

delicious,' and the column labels indicate each assessing the assertion that dinner is delicious. Then we can draw the following matrix representing the contextualist reading:

'Dinner is delicious'

<i>Contextualist</i>	<i>Alice Assesses</i>	<i>Joan Assesses</i>	<i>Susan Assesses</i>
<i>Alice Speaks</i>	T	T	T
<i>Joan Speaks</i>	T	T	T
<i>Susan Speaks</i>	F	F	F

Rows vary as the speaker changes, since on the contextualist reading the sentence 'Dinner is delicious' expresses a different proposition for each speaker, something like 'I think dinner is delicious.' Thus, even though in the third column Susan is assessing the assertion, Alice is the speaker, and (on the contextualist reading), what Alice said is true for Susan. Note that nonindexical contextualism, defined by *NI* above, defines the same matrix as the contextualist, because the speaker determines the truth-value of the proposition expressed. This highlights the chief reason I do not consider nonindexical contextualism to be a relativist theory of truth: all assertions will be absolutely correct or incorrect, regardless of who assesses them, once it is determined who made the assertion.

Interestingly, we can recover the relativist reading of 'Dinner is delicious' from the contextualist matrix. First, we introduce the †-operator, or dagger operator.⁴ The †-operator takes the left-to-right diagonal of a propositional matrix and projects it onto the horizontal, which will transpose the Contextualist matrix. If we apply the †-operator to the Contextualist matrix we recover the Relativist matrix:

'Dinner is Delicious'

<i>Relativist</i>	<i>Alice Assesses</i>	<i>Joan Assesses</i>	<i>Susan Assesses</i>
<i>Alice Speaks</i>	T	T	F
<i>Joan Speaks</i>	T	T	F
<i>Susan Speaks</i>	T	T	F

The matching rows represent the relativist thesis that the same proposition is expressed regardless of speaker, and varied rows the thesis that the assessor of the assertion determines the truth-value. As long as the constraints on the worlds selected mentioned above are respected, one will always be able to recover the Relativist matrix from the Contextualist matrix by applying the dagger operator.

From these considerations we arrive at the necessary and sufficient condition for a theory to qualify as relativist mentioned above: Keeping in mind the constraints on the set of worlds under consideration, if a theory determines any column variance then it qualifies as relativist. Equivalently, a relativist theory implies that some propositions become sensitive (i.e. vary in truth value) if circumstances are more finely grained than mere worlds at times. MacFarlane includes the standards of the relevant assessor in the circumstance of evaluation, a move to assessment sensitivity. Assessment sensitivity is demonstrated in the relativist matrix above. Given an understanding of how these matrices are used, this condition serves as a functional definition of relativism. Note, however, that this definition does not deem nonindexical contextualism relativist, a result I embrace but I am sure some would not.

This formulation of relativism is also useful because it highlights the new proposition that the relativist introduces to the contextualist, the proposition that is represented by the truth-values along the diagonal. To be a relativist one does not need to deny that *sometimes* contextualism is correct. It is sufficient to claim that there is also a further proposition, represented by the truth-values along the diagonal, that is true for the assessors of a certain relevant standard and false for those that hold the opposite standard across all possible worlds where the assessment is possible. The contextualist is committed to denying that any proposition with that set of truth-values exists.

Now, with some understanding of the relativist approach, we can move on to the prime motivation for relativism: relativism's ability to preserve genuine disagreement.⁵ I will call the intuition that parties can genuinely disagree about subjective matters.

Disagreement:

Disagreement: When a speaker makes an assertion concerning a subjective matter, and the audience denies the assertion, the speaker and audience genuinely disagree.

It is important that the disagreement discussed here is not mistaken for the act of disagreeing, which can occur whether or not two parties assert incompatible assertions. Instead, genuine disagreement occurs when two parties affirm incompatible propositions. For example, one may disagree with Creationists about the age of the earth without ever having met them. One may disagree by denying a proposition (“The Creationists think the earth is 5,000 years old, but it isn’t”) or by affirming an incompatible proposition (“The earth is actually over 4.5 billion years old”).

The following case is illustrative the type of examples called upon by the relativist who appeals to Disagreement (this one is of epistemic modals). Susan and her classmate Harry are studying in the basement of the library, when Susan whispers to Harry, “It’s so cold today it might be snowing.” Ben overhears, but from his angle he can see that it is not snowing and he thinks, “Susan is wrong, it is not snowing.” The puzzle is this: from Susan’s perspective (let’s say that she saw on the weather report that it was likely to snow, and her weatherman is *really* good) it seems perfectly true that it might be snowing. However, from Ben’s perspective it seems false that it might be snowing, since he can see that it isn’t actually snowing.

A contextualist may accommodate this instance of Variance by making ‘It might be snowing’ context sensitive. On this reading, Susan’s comment to Harry means something like ‘For all I know, it is

snowing'. If this is what Susan's comment meant, then Ben does not really disagree with Susan, since his belief only concerns the weather, not Susan's justification. This explains how Susan can correctly believe that it might be snowing while Ben may correctly deny that it might be snowing. But this approach leaves an important datum unexplained: Ben believes that Susan is mistaken, and it seems likely that if he were to correct her then she might retract her assertion (e.g. "I was wrong, it's not snowing").

Roughly, the Relativist makes the truth of 'It might be snowing' relative to each assessor, without altering the content expressed by each utterance. Susan and Ben believe contradictory propositions, but the truth of those propositions is relative. When Susan initially utters 'It might be snowing,' what she says is true relative to her standards. For Ben, however, the proposition expressed by Susan is false. The Relativist claims to preserve disagreement because from either perspective the other's belief is false. This has been called 'faultless disagreement' by MacFarlane (2007) and Kolbel (2004): disagreement because by either's lights the other is mistaken, and faultless because from a metasemantic perspective both may be accurate in their beliefs.

But why does Ben's belief imply that Susan's belief is false? This is a legitimate worry, since a parallel has been drawn in the literature between relativism, temporalism, and the treatment of assertions across possible worlds,⁶ but in the latter cases few claim that there can be genuine disagreement. This is not to say that the proposition asserted and its negation are compatible, or that one can believe both coherently, just that two separate and seemingly contradictory assertions may be accurate. For MacFarlane, however, there is no sense in which two conflicting assertions on subjective matters can be accurate *simpliciter*; accuracy of assertion must also be relative to a context of assessment. But making assertion relative also makes disagreement relative, since the accuracy of my assertion will only relatively make my friend's incompatible assertion inaccurate. MacFarlane embraces this result and defends this move to 'perspectival disagreement,' since it seems to capture the data the best of any theory.

According to *R*, from one context of assessment an assertion on a subjective matter and its denial are inconsistent. However, MacFarlane glosses over that there can only be disagreement in the object language, not in the metalanguage. For instance, my Philistine friend may correctly respond to me, "You are wrong (object language), but your assertion is accurate as assessed from *your* context of assessment (metalanguage)." In the object language we are bound to our own context of assessment, but in the metalanguage we may freely 'look from above,' meaning the facts will be absolute. But if this is so, why do we think that there is disagreement, and why must we speak the object language? MacFarlane hasn't answered these questions satisfactorily.

The alternate view I prefer is the oft-overlooked 'assessment indexical' account. The rough idea is this: a single utterance of a sentence in a context expresses many propositions, and a different one for each assessor. Cappelen (2008) defends a similar view, so we may begin with his *P1* and *P2* that define *Pluralist Content Relativism*:

P1: An utterance *u* of a sentence *S* in a context *C* will (literally) assert (and *say* and *claim*) a plurality of propositions.

P2: What's said by an utterance u of S in a context of utterance C varies across contexts of interpretation (i.e. contexts of assessment).

Cappelen calls the assessment indexical account *monistic content relativism* (MCR). He does not defend this view, but he describes MCR as follows: "On this view, there's one proposition asserted by any utterance of a sentence [relative to a context of interpretation], that proposition is its semantic content, and that content can vary across contexts of interpretation" (271).

The use of pluralistic content relativism can account for the data supposedly explained by relativism without resorting to the use of relative truth. But, while he explains its utility, Cappelen does little to explain the mechanics of his theory; he only mentions that it would piggy-back on the explanations found in Relativism and Contextualism. If we adopt MCR, however, a new line of explanation presents itself.

To begin, as Lasersohn (2005) notes, what is asserted in the subjective cases mentioned above is not an ordinary quantified statement of the form 'Everyone who looks at the painting will find it beautiful' or even 'Some who look at this painting will find it beautiful.' But what Lasersohn (and others) miss is that we are not constrained to ordinary quantifiers, since not all quantifiers in natural language match those in first-order logic. This has been well noted in the past; for example, Boolos (1984) mentions examples like "For every A there is a B ," which cannot be expressed in first-order notation.

With this in mind, I would like to present a few parallel examples that elucidate how an assessment indexical view might look. We begin with the assertion (a bet) 'If the Blazers win, they'll win big.'⁷ Clearly this is not an assertion of the material conditional, since one does not win the bet if the Blazers lose. The best explanation is that the assertion is not completed until the Blazers win, meaning the assertion itself is conditional (instead of a conditional).

Now take the example, 'For each game they play, if the Blazers win, they'll win big.' This seems to iterate the conditional assertion to each game. While a single bet is made, the bet represents many assertions. The form of this quantifier loosely matches Boolos's example above, since the bet applies to every game but does not simply quantify over them.

How does this help? I would like to suggest that the content of an assertion like 'the painting is beautiful' is roughly 'for each viewer, if they view this painting, they will find it beautiful,' interpreted as a bet like the Blazers example. This explains why a single recalcitrant case does not negate the entire assertion *and* why any individual who disagrees might speak up. This move is similar to the use of functions to explain temporal propositions or the essential indexical as in Sider's *Four-Dimensionalism*, and also Recanati's moderate relativism, since it may employ a two-dimensional framework (the difference is that Recanati thinks the neutral content can have a truth-value, while I see it as merely the assertion of a bet that will have many instances, some true and some false).

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¹ A similar point is made in Crispin Wright, "Relativism about Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts about the Very Idea, in *Relative Truth*, Oxford University Press 2008, pp. 157-186

² The notion of content should not be confused with extension; it is precisely the relativist thesis that a single sentence can have a fixed content but varied extension. cf. MacFarlane "Nonindexical Contextualism," 232.

³ For the moment we forget Kaplan's use of 'context of utterance' to refer only to possible situations in which an agent may utter a sentence, not actual cases of utterance.

⁴ The dagger operator was first introduced by Frank Vlach, "'Now' and 'Then: A Formal Study in the Logic of Tense Anaphora," Ph.D. diss., UCLA.

⁵ This is identified as a chief motivation by Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2007), and Kolbel (2004).

⁶ For instance in Kolbel (2004) and MacFarlane (2005).

⁷ This example was suggested to me by Troy Cross, who attributed it to Keith DeRose.