

Perspective in Context: Relative Truth, Knowledge, and the First Person

Dissertation Abstract

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My dissertation explores the nature of perspectival thoughts and the context-sensitivity of the language used to express them. Perspectival thoughts are thoughts that depend in a special way on the perspective of the thinker. I focus on two kinds of perspectival thoughts: ‘subjective’ evaluative thoughts about matters of personal taste, such as *Beetroot is delicious* or *Skydiving is fun*, and first-personal or *de se* thoughts about oneself, such as *I am hungry* or *I have been fooled*. I develop a novel form of relativism about truth, on which the truth of some (but not all) perspectival thought and talk is relative to the perspective of an evaluating *group*.

Before developing my positive view, I argue in Part I of the dissertation that the realm of ‘subjective’ evaluative thought and talk whose truth is perspective-relative includes attributions of knowledge of the form ‘*S* knows that *p*.’ After a brief introduction in chapter 1, I start in chapter 2 with a new, error-theoretic challenge for relativism about knowledge attributions. I argue that relativism can only account for all of the empirical data from speakers’ use of the word ‘know’ – in particular, in sceptical paradoxes and ordinary epistemic closure puzzles – if a problematic form of semantic blindness is attributed to speakers.¹ However, in chapter 3 I show that all major competitor theories – forms of invariantism and contextualism – are subject to serious error-theoretic objections, too. This dialectical situation raises fundamental questions for all empirical theorising about the meaning of natural language expressions: What makes for a plausible error attribution? What is a good error-theoretic explanation? In answer to these general questions, I provide a number of criteria for the evaluation and comparison of different kinds of error attributions, and I argue that they give us reason to think that relativism’s error attributions are more plausible than those of its competitors.

In Part II, I then develop a novel unified account of the content and communication of perspectival thoughts. The popular Lewisian view of perspectival thought understands belief and other other attitudes as self-location. In chapter 4, I show that the self-location view of belief is in conflict with the received picture of linguistic communication, on which a single content is transmitted from speaker to hearer: the speaker believes it, expresses it in speech, and the hearer comes to believe it if she understands and trusts the speaker. I argue that these two views *can* be reconciled and the conflict solved if mental content and speech act content is understood in terms of *sequenced worlds*. On the view I advocate, content is understood as a set of sequenced worlds – possible worlds ‘centered’ on a group of individuals inhabiting the world at some time. Intuitively, a sequenced world is a way a group of people may be. So to believe a sequenced worlds content in conversation is to group-locate: to locate oneself and the other conversational participants. I develop a Stalnakerian model of communication based on sequenced worlds content, and I provide a suitable semantics for personal pronouns and predicates of personal taste. In chapter 5, I show that one of the advantages of this model is its compatibility with both nonindexical contextualism and truth relativism about taste. I argue in chapters 5 and 6 that the empirical data from eavesdropping, retraction, and disagreement cases support a relativist version of the model. I show in detail how to account for these phenomena on the sequenced worlds view.

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¹A version of chapter two is published as “Relativism, Sceptical Paradox, and Semantic Blindness” in *Philosophical Studies* (OnlineFirst, 2011).