

What's up with **Relativism**?

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Outline

- ① The Kaplanian Semantic-Pragmatic Framework
- ② The Dialectical Landscape
- ③ Arguments in Favour of and Against Truth Relativism
- ④ Areas of Application
- ⑤ What's Up With Relativism?

A Simple Schema

x

Concepts

Beliefs

Perception

Morality

Justification

Aesthetics

Taste

Truth

⋮

is relative to

y

Language

Culture

Historical Period

Cognitive Architecture

Scientific Frameworks

Body of Rules

Social Conventions

Standards

⋮

An Example: Taste

- 1st observation: how we talk about taste
Haggis is tasty, delicious, tastes good/bad, disgusting, . . .
- 'is tasty' is a 1-place predicate.
- Absolutism: Reality contains the monadic property *being tasty*.
- Relativism: Reality does not contain a monadic property *being tasty*.
Taste facts are dyadic: some things are tasty relative to some standard of taste.
Reality contains dyadic properties such as *being tasty relative to Scottish standards of taste*, or perhaps *being tasty to Scots*, or perhaps *being tasty to Scott*.
- What is the relationship between claims about taste (language) and taste facts (reality)?
- What is the meaning of claims such as *Haggis is tasty*?

From Taste Relativism to Truth Relativism

- Taste relativism: Facts about tastiness are dyadic; they are of the form *X is tasty/not tasty relative to standard of taste Y*
- But claims about taste often have 1-place predicates, such as 'is tasty'.
- Truth relativism regarding tastiness: 'Haggis is tasty' is true, or false, only relative to a standard of taste.
- Truth relativist idea (1st pass):
The truths of a domain D involve an unexpected relation to a parameter.
(Boghossian, 2006, 13)
- Relative truth???

Context-sensitivity

- (1) I am hungry.
- (2) This is where they produce the famous Klöcher Traminer.
- (3) Yesterday they presented this year's Junker.
 - Truth of a sentence in context (or an utterance thereof) depends on the speaker, demonstration, time, salient individuals (location, ...) of the utterance.
- (4) Snow is white.
 - Truth of a sentence in context (or an utterance thereof) depends on the speaker, demonstration, time, salient individuals, world (location, ...) of the utterance.

Kaplan (1989): Character and Content

Two senses of 'meaning':

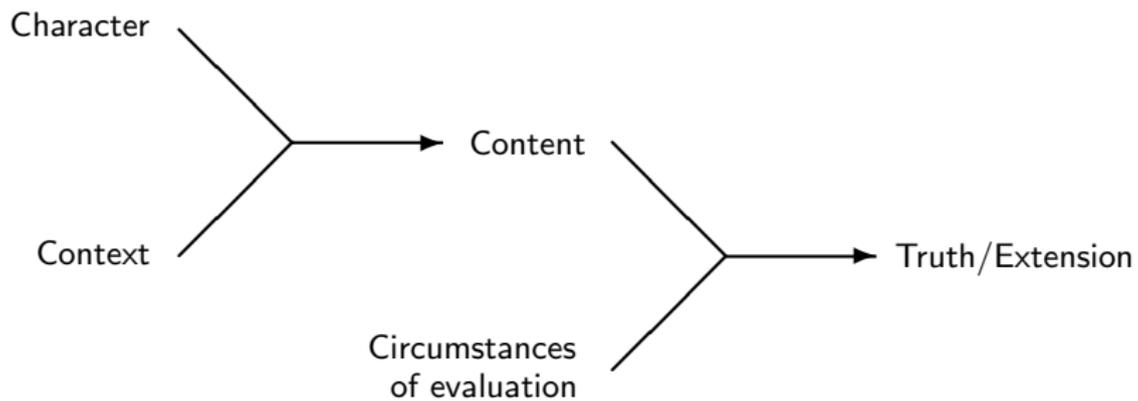
(5) Moore: I'm an anti-skeptic.

(6) Guido: I'm an anti-skeptic.

(7) Martina: Moore is an anti-skeptic.

- In one sense, (5) and (6) have the same meaning. In another sense, they do not have the same meaning: they don't 'say the same.' (Moore talks about Moore, Guido talks about Guido.)
- In one sense, (5) and (7) have the same meaning (they are both about Moore). Yet in another sense, they do not have the same meaning.
- **Character:** an expression's standing meaning (constant from context to context) a rule from a context of utterance to the expression's content
⇒ (5) and (6) have the same character (but not content).
- **Content:** an expression's variable meaning (may change from context to context) 'what is said', 'the proposition expressed', 'the information communicated'
⇒ (5) and (7) have the same content (but not character).

Kaplan (1989)



The Views

Indexical contextualism

The content (but not character) of expressions of type e may vary with the context of utterance.

Nonindexical contextualism

The truth/extension of expressions of type e may vary with the context of utterance, even though the content (and character) of e does not vary.

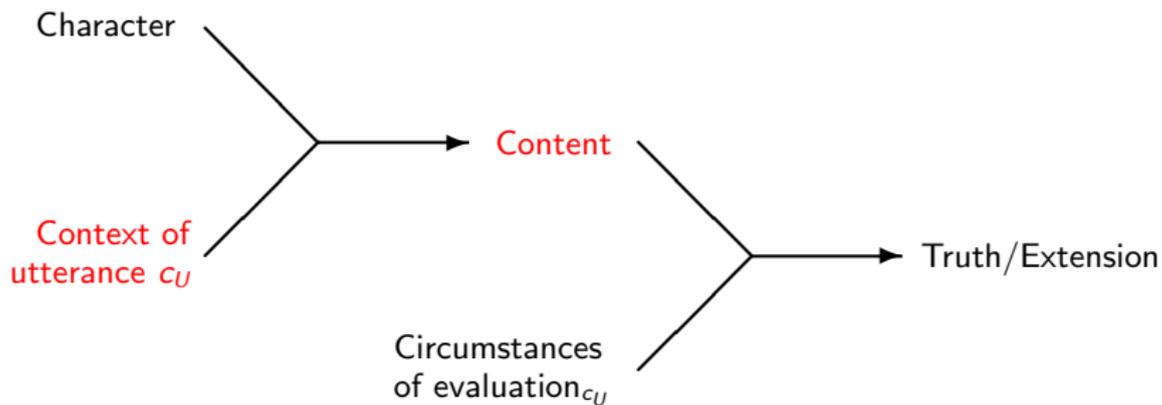
Truth relativism

The truth/extension of expressions of type e may vary with the context of assessment, even though the content (and character) of e does not vary.

Content relativism

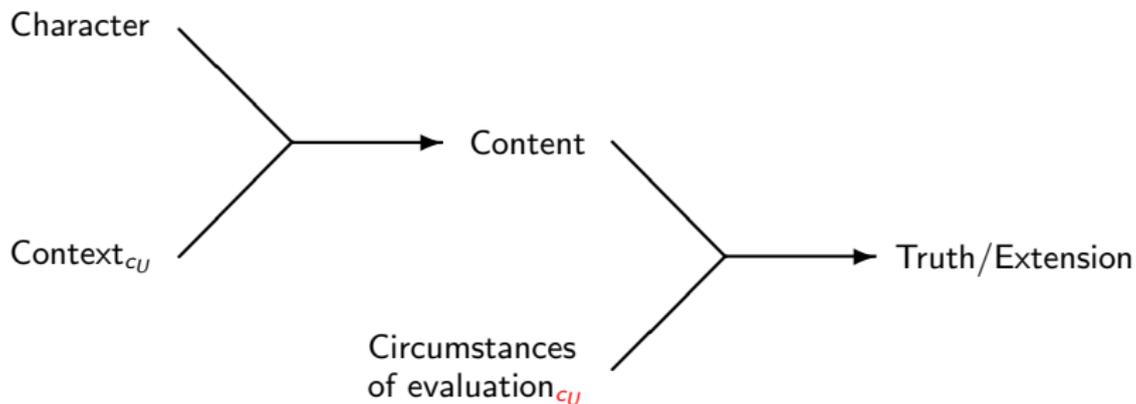
The **content** (but not character) of expressions of type e may vary with the **context of assessment**.

Indexical Contextualism



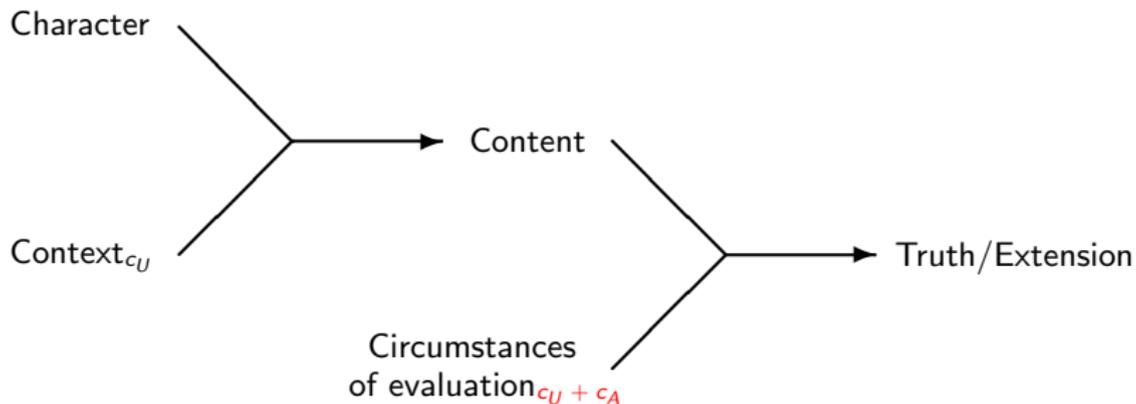
- (8) DK: Haggis is tasty.
Content: *Haggis is tasty to DK*

Nonindexical Contextualism



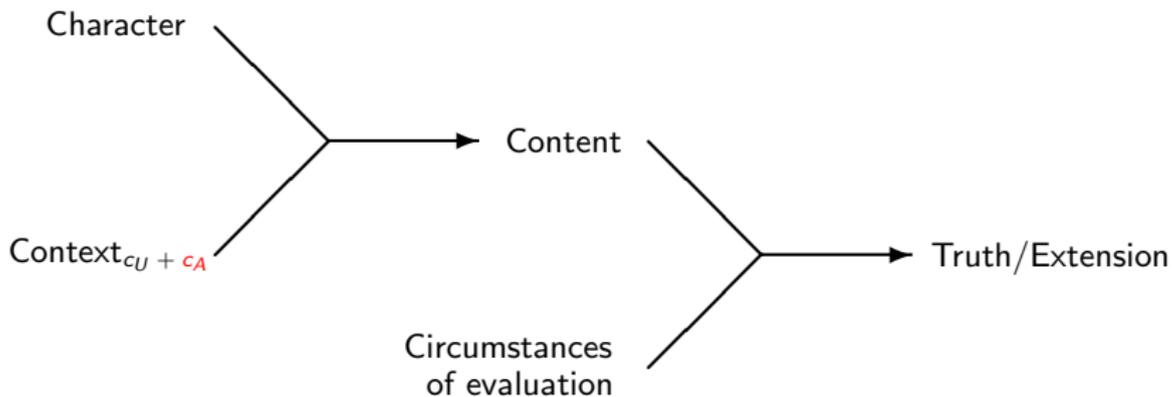
- (9) DK: Haggis is tasty.
Content: *Haggis is tasty*
Circumstances of evaluation: $\langle w_{c_U}, s_{c_U} \rangle$, where w_{c_U} and s_{c_U} are the world and standard of taste of the context of utterance, respectively

Truth Relativism



- (10) DK: Haggis is tasty.
Content: *Haggis is tasty*
Circumstances of evaluation: $\langle w_{c_U}, s_{c_A} \rangle$, where s_{c_U} is the standard of taste of the context of assessment

Content Relativism



- (11) DK: Haggis is tasty.
Content: *Haggis is tasty to A*, where A is the assessor of the utterance (the individual salient at c_A)

The Question & the Views

The research questions:

- ① What is the meaning of expressions of type e in English (German, ...)?
- ② What is the meaning of natural language expressions of type e ?
- ③ What are the right semantics & pragmatics for natural language expressions of type e ?
- ④ What is the nature of context-sensitivity in natural language?
- ⑤ What does this teach us about the nature of truth, some parts of reality?

The views:

- ① Indexical contextualism
- ② Nonindexical contextualism
- ③ Truth relativism
- ④ Content relativism
- ⑤ Expressivism
- ⑥ Absolutism

Arguments in Favour of Truth Relativism

- ① Argument from (faultless) disagreement
 - ② Eavesdropping
 - ③ Retraction
- ⋮

Agreement & Disagreement

Some 'data':

(12) a. Sal: Haggis is tasty.
b. Sue No/I disagree/That's false, haggis is not tasty.

(13) a. Sal: Haggis is tasty.
b. Sandy: Yes, haggis is tasty.

(14) Maria: Sal and Sue disagree whether haggis is tasty.

(15) Maria: Sal and Sandy agree that haggis is tasty.

- Disagreement markers ('No', 'I disagree', 'That's false' [?]) can be used felicitously in (16b).
- There is a sense of disagreement and contradiction between (16a) and (16b).
- (Dis)agreement can felicitously be reported in (18) and (19).

Agreement & Disagreement: Against Indexical Contextualism

Some 'data':

(16) a. Sal: Haggis is tasty.
b. Sue No/I disagree/That's false, haggis is not tasty.

(17) a. Sal: Haggis is tasty.
b. Sandy: Yes, haggis is tasty.

(18) Maria: Sal and Sue disagree whether haggis is tasty.

(19) Maria: Sal and Sandy agree that haggis is tasty.

Simple indexical contextualism:

- (16a) expresses the content *Haggis tastes good to Sal*. (16b) expresses the content *Haggis doesn't taste good to Sue*.
- The contents expressed by (16a) and (16b) do not contradict each other.
- Contrast (16) with (20):

(20) a. Sal: Haggis is tasty to me.
b. Sue ?? No/I disagree/That's false, haggis is not tasty to me.

e.g. Lasersohn (2005)
López de Sa (2008), Huvenes (2012), Sundell (2010)

Absolutism and Faultlessness

Absolutism: Neither the content nor the truth of sentences containing predicates of personal taste varies with the context of use or context of assessment.

- (16) a. Sal: Haggis is tasty.
b. Sue: No/I disagree/That's false, haggis is not tasty.

- (16') a. Sal: Haggis is tasty.
Content: *Haggis is tasty*
b. Sue: No/I disagree/That's false, haggis is not tasty.
Content: *Haggis is not tasty*

- Disagreement saved: (16'a) and (16'b) contradict each other.
- But what about **faultlessness**? Either (16'a) or (16'b) is false, so either Sal or Sue is at fault. (Kölbel, 2004; Wright, 2006)

Truth Relativism and Faultless Disagreement

- (16) a. Sal: Haggis is tasty.
b. Sue: No/I disagree/That's false, haggis is not tasty.
- (16'') a. Sal: Haggis is tasty.
Content: *Haggis is tasty*
b. Sue: No/I disagree/That's false, haggis is not tasty.
Content: *Haggis is not tasty*

- Disagreement: (16'' a) and (16'' b) contradict each other.
- Faultlessness: (16'' a) is true relative to Sal, (16'' b) is true relative to Sue. Sal and Sue each says something **true relative to him-/herself** and thus is not at fault. (Kölbel, 2004; Wright, 2006)

Retraction

- (22)
- Cristina: Guido might be in his office.
 - Martina: No, he can't be. I just saw him enter the seminar room with his teaching materials.
 - Cristina: Oh, I see. Then I was wrong/I take that back.

- It's natural for Cristina to take back (22a) in light of new, contradicting evidence.
- Indexical contextualism: (22a) expresses *Given what Cristina knows, Guido is in his office*. She shouldn't take *that* back – she wasn't wrong to make a claim about what she *then* knew.
- Truth relativism: (22a) is correct – true relative to Cristina's information state at the time. But it's also felicitous for her to take back (22a) at the time of (22c), since (22a) is false relative to her information state at the time of (22c).

Objections to Truth Relativism

- **Obscurity Objection**
Truth relativism is an impenetrable and obscure doctrine. We should ignore it.
- **Self-refutation**
- **Truth & the equivalence schema**
Truth is characterized by the equivalence schema: *The proposition that P is true iff P*. But an equivalence schema makes sense for a monadic truth predicate.
- **No faultless disagreement objection** (Rosenkranz, 2008; Moltmann, 2010)
- **No operators objection** (Cappelen & Hawthorne, 2009; Stanley, 2005, 147-52)

Self-refutation?

Global Truth Relativism

(GTR) *All* truths are true merely relatively.

Dilemma: What about (GTR) itself?

- ① If it is true absolutely, then there is one absolute truth, and (GTR) is refuted.
- ② If it is true only relatively (e.g. relative to the relativist's perspective), then . . .

⋮

. . . it is pragmatically self-undermining: to assert something is to put it forward as true (absolutely); the act of asserting (GTR) presupposes its falsity.

Replies:

- ① Local Truth Relativism: Truths of a domain of discourse D , are true only relatively.
- ② Making sense of assertion as putting something forward as true relative to oneself.

(MacFarlane, 2014, §2.1)

Areas of Application

- Predicates of Personal Taste
tasty, disgusting (Lasersohn, 2005; Stephenson, 2007; MacFarlane, 2014)
- Epistemic modals
John might/must be in Boston. (Egan et al., 2005; Stephenson, 2007; MacFarlane, 2011)
- Deontic modals
We ought to close shaft A. (Kolodny & MacFarlane, 2010; MacFarlane, 2014)
- Knowledge Ascriptions
John knows that he has hands (Richard, 2004; MacFarlane, 2005a)
- Future contingents
There will be a sea battle tomorrow. (MacFarlane, 2003)
- Vagueness
Mary is rich. (Richard, 2008)
- Aesthetic vocabulary
Van Gogh's Starry Night is beautiful.
- Moral vocabulary
Civilian casualties are a permissible consequence of war.

State of the Debate

- ① Still hostility to truth relativism, usually motivated by conservativeness
- ② Defence of indexical contextualisms (e.g. accounts of disagreement)
- ③ Objections to argument from faultless disagreement for truth relativism
- ④ Expressivism on the rise

Open Questions & Interesting Issues

- 1 Methodological status of disagreement (reports) for semantic theorizing
Nature of disagreement
- 2 What defines whether something is relativism or expressivism? (same compositional semantics)
- 3 Relationship of 'subjective' (truth-relativistic) sentences & thoughts and *de se* thoughts (first-personal thoughts about oneself)
- 4 Metaphysics of relativism metasemantics of relativism representation, truth making, reference . . .
- 5 Relationship 'new' (truth & content) relativism and traditional relativism
- 6 Expressivism
- 7 Lexical and compositional semantics of philosophically interesting expressions such as PPTs, epistemic modals, aesthetic vocabulary, etc.

Where to start reading

- A very short introduction to the current debate: Kölbel (2008)
A biased introduction to the current debate: Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009)
- History & varieties of relativism (until 1990s): Baghramian (2004)
- Semantic-pragmatic background: Kaplan (1989); Lewis (1980)
- Truth relativism: Papers by MacFarlane (e.g. 2005b; 2005a; 2011),
MacFarlane's book MacFarlane (2014)
Lasersohn (2005)
- Contextualism: Schaffer (2011), Glanzberg (2007)
- Expressivism: Yalcin (2007, 2011), Schroeder (2008)
- Disagreement: Kölbel (2004); MacFarlane (2007)

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