Attitudes and Relativism

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Contextualism and Relativism Workshop, May/June 2008
Outline

1. Two Dogmas
   - What is Relativism?
   - The Two Dogmas of Classical Contextualism
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2 Factive Verbs
   • Kai and Thony’s Argument
   • Responses
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3 Metasemantics
   - Glanzberg’s Argument
   - Constraints on Indexicals
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3. Metasemantics
   - Glanzberg’s Argument
   - Constraints on Indexicals

4. Moral Relativism
   - Patterns of Attitude Ascription
   - Moral Terms Don’t Behave
   - Objections
What is Relativism?

One Vocalization, Many Truth-values

- First attempt: A single vocalization can be true relative to one assessor, false relative to another.
- But we need to exclude speech-act pluralism, which isn’t relativistic
What is Relativism?

One Vocalization, Many Assertions

- Second attempt: A single vocalization can constitute an assertion of \( p \) relative to one assessor, \( q \) relative to another.

- Arguably this is how we should understand second-person pronouns in certain group settings.

- But this leaves us with a fairly conservative view of assertion.
Final attempt: A single assertion can be true relative to one assessor, false relative to another.

This still isn’t as radical as some positions, but it is as far as I’ll go.
(T) The truth value of the content of any assertion is the same relative to any assessor.
(C) The semantic content of an assertion is the same relative to any assessor.
Denying the First Dogma

- Contents are sets of centred worlds.
- Same content for any evaluator, so (C) holds.
- But whether that content is true or false is evaluator sensitive, so (T) is false.
Assessors are involved in fixing the content of the assertion, so (C) is false.

But the content itself is a possible-worlds proposition, so (T) is true.
Denying the Second Dogma

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- But the content itself is a possible-worlds proposition, so (T) is true.
- Possible application (that I don’t defend) for second person pronouns.
- Possible application (that I defend elsewhere) for epistemic modals.
**Denying the Second Dogma**

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- But the content itself is a possible-worlds proposition, so (T) is true.
- Possible application (that I don’t defend) for second person pronouns.
- Possible application (that I defend elsewhere) for epistemic modals.
- Possibly helps with the agreement/disagreement data.
The Two Dogmas of Classical Contextualism

**Terminology**

- Not going to take a stand here on terminology.
- I’ve used "‘indexical relativism’" for the combination of (T) and ¬(C), but that’s a contested term.
- Here I’m only interested in (T) and (C), and the two models above for implementing them in a broader semantic picture.
- I will use one bit of terminology: "‘orthodox’" for theories that accept both (T) and (C), and "‘heterodox’" for theories that don’t.
1. S realises that p presupposes that p.

2. This presupposition is carried over when the sentence is used as the antecedent of a conditional. So, for instance, If S realises that p, then q presupposes that p.

3. But, on standard heterodox proposals, we can properly say If S realises that it might be that p, then q, even though it isn’t true that it might be that p.

4. So, those standard heterodox proposals are false.
"Bond planted a bug and some misleading evidence pointing to his being in Zurich and slipped out. Now he and Leiter are listening in from London. As they listen, Leiter is getting a bit worried: Blofeld hasn’t yet found the misleading evidence that points to Bond’s being in Zurich. Leiter turns to Bond and says: (34) If Blofeld realises you might be in Zurich, you can breathe easy—he’ll send his henchman to Zurich to find you."
Kai and Thony’s Argument

The Problem

- On standard heterodox accounts, (34) has a presupposition failure.
- But (34) has no presupposition failure.
The orthodox contextualist response is to posit a variable attached to ‘might’.

This variable is bound in (34), but free in a free-standing utterance of its antecedent.

That’s why there is no presupposition failure.
First Heterodox Response

- The theorist who accepts (T) but not (C) can say a similar thing.
- There is a variable that is bound in (34), but free in a free-standing utterance of its antecedent.
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There is a variable that is bound in (34), but free in a free-standing utterance of its antecedent.

Note that in the free case, the variable is in what’s asserted. It doesn’t get filled in by context of utterance, but by an evaluator.

Some similarity here to Bach-style incomplete assertion views.
Second Heterodox Response

- More interesting for the theorist who accepts (C) but not (T).
- Compare what happens in fiction
More interesting for the theorist who accepts (C) but not (T).

Compare what happens in fiction

(5) Watson realised that private detectives were (in late 19th Century London) better at solving murder mysteries than police.

No presupposition failure.
Also no problem with conditionals.

(6) Had Watson realised earlier that private detectives were better at solving murder mysteries than police, he would have liked Holmes more than he did.
Or with conditionals about the actual world.

(7) Had Watson realised earlier that private detectives were better at solving murder mysteries than police, the early chapters of the book would have been more interesting.
Or with indicatives. (Imagine the following is uttered about a to-be-shown TV movie of *A Study in Scarlet*.)

(8) If Watson realises early on that private detectives were better at solving murder mysteries than police, the early scenes will be more interesting.
If the antecedent is about another world, presuppositions need only be satisfied there.

Should expect that will be true if the antecedent is about another *index*, whether or not it is a different world.

So this theories should expect that, say, (34) won’t have a presupposition failure.

So there is no objection to this kind of heterodoxy here.
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2. Metasemantic theories about how context-sensitive terms get their values on particular occasions of use are never hideously complicated.
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2. Metasemantic theories about how context-sensitive terms get their values on particular occasions of use are never hideously complicated.

3. So, contextualism is false.
Michael Glanzberg (2007) attributes this argument to some relativists.

We might think it is the point of various surveys of why particular contextualist proposals fail.

It is more common that such surveys are complete with respect to not-hideously-complicated interpretations than that they are complete simpliciter.
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Perhaps no one did.

In any case, it looks like a bad argument.

As Glanzberg points out, for non-automatic indexicals, the meta-semantics is *usually* hideously complicated.

The only reason to think otherwise is concentrating too much on automatic indexicals like *I*. 


There’s a better argument from meta-semantics.
I think Egan et al intended it, though we certainly didn’t put it as clearly as we might have.
The argument turns on the fact that meta-semantics *should* be complicated and messy.
(9) Those guys are in trouble, but they don’t know that they are.
(10) *Those guys are in trouble, but they might not be.
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(9) Those guys are in trouble, but they don’t know that they are.
(10) *Those guys are in trouble, but they might not be.
Somewhat surprisingly, (10) can’t be used to express (9).
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- Something similar to the SIC is true for *we*.
- And it has to be true in virtue of the meaning of *we*.
- It could hardly be a mere meta-semantic generalisation that the group includes the speaker.
Lots and lots of non-automatic indexicals have meaning-provided constraints.

But they retain the constraints in bound or otherwise embedded uses.

There’s something wrong with every student thinks she will win if some students are male.
Constraints on Indexicals

Conclusions about Constraints

1. There are semantic constraints on indexicals.
2. Any interesting generalisation about the denotation of an indexical is a feature of its meaning.
3. These constraints remain in force when the indexical is bound.
Speaker Inclusion Constraint

It doesn’t behave this way.

In *Every student thinks they might have failed*, doesn’t mean (can’t mean) *Every student think that for all I know, they failed*.

That’s a problem for contextualism about *might*. 
If contextualism is true, then the explanation of the SIC is that it is part of the meaning of "might" that the relevant group includes the speaker.

If it is part of the meaning of "might" that the relevant group includes the speaker, then this must be true for all uses of "might" including bound uses.

When "might" is used inside the scope of an attitude ascription, the relevant group need not include the speaker.

So, contextualism is not true.
Interpretations of (11) have to be speaker-centered.

(11) Otto believes that we are fools.

The group denoted by *we* has to include the speaker.
Interpretations of (14) have to be subject-centered.

(14) Jack believes that Smith might be happy.

The group relevant to the interpretation of *might* has to be centered around Jack.
Interpretations of (12) and (13) are more flexible.

(12) Vinny the Vulture believes that rotting carcasses are tasty.
(13) Suzy believes that this type of dog food is tasty.

The group relevant to the interpretation of *tasty* could be the subject, the speaker, some other salient individual...
Knowledge reports pattern very tightly with belief reports.

(11) Otto believes/knows that we are fools.

(12) Vinny the Vulture believes/knows that rotting carcasses are tasty.

(13) Suzy believes/knows that this type of dog food is tasty.

(14) Jack believes/knows that Smith might be happy.

All the knowledge claims can be true, I think, even if, for example, rotting carcasses aren’t tasty, and Smith must not be happy.
You should expect just this kind of pattern
Else you would instances of the following schema
(15) S believes that ...t.... Indeed S knows it. But S doesn’t know that ...t....
Moral Terms Don’t Behave

Moral Attitude Reports

1. Assume that *X is wrong* should be interpreted as *X is wrong relative to some salient standards*.
2. Take any view you like about salience and about interpretation.
3. But assume that this can make a difference.
4. Then you’ll get cases like the following, that should turn out true (or at least appropriate).
5. (16) Jefferson Davis believed that helping fugitive slaves was wrong.
6. (17) Jefferson Davis knew that helping fugitive slaves was wrong.
7. But (17) is simply false.
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The problem is that we can’t both take (16) to be true on its only possible interpretation, and (17) to be false on its only possible interpretation.
This is question-begging against the moral relativist

- But neither premise is question-begging!
- And if it’s question-begging to appeal to semantic intuitions that go against a theory, we’ll have to give up doing semantics.
Absolutist Prejudices

We would see that (17) is true if we didn’t have anti-relativist prejudices

- I’ve gone a long way to stack the deck here in favour of relativism.
- This is a section in a pro-relativism (of some kinds) paper.
- And I’ve pointed out (twice) that we can sometimes say $S$ knows that $T$ when we can’t say $T$.
- But focus as much as you like on the possibility of such cases; moral cases don’t seem to be among them.
Objections

Moral Terms Might be Sui Generis

Perhaps these are the only instances of the form of sentence in (15)

- Perhaps, but there’s a lot to give up.
- (15) sounds fairly bad, even in this case.
- And it’s hard to find a well-motivated semantics that allows for this pair of belief report/knowledge report interpretations.
Relativism has, as this shows, counterintuitive consequences. But absolutism has counterintuitive consequences too, and the kind of error involves here is relatively harmless

- Assessing this, i.e. doing meta-ethics, is well beyond the scope of this paper.
- As a matter of autobiography, I’ve never found arguments of this form compelling, because they usually rely on a strongish form of motivational internalism, and I simply give that up.
- But it’s clearly true that there might be greater costs than the one I’ve shown here to be found elsewhere.