

Varieties of Relativism: Indexical, Propositional and Factual

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Abstract

Several authors have argued that a range of phenomena calls for a relativisation of propositional truth to contexts of assessment or, more generally, perspectives. I want to defend the more orthodox view that whether a proposition is true depends only on whether the represented states of affairs obtain. I offer an alternative account of the relativity suggested by the data, factual relativism, and argue that a plausible propositional relativism reduces to either indexical or factual relativism.

We can distinguish between three broad varieties of relativism.

1. *Indexical relativism*, according to which certain (sentence-like) linguistic items express different truth-evaluable propositions relative to different contexts.¹
2. *Propositional relativism*, according to which the same proposition may have different truth-values relative to different perspectives—say contexts of assessment, temporal perspectives, conceptual frameworks or states of information.
3. *Factual relativism*, according to which the facts relevant for settling the truth-value of a given proposition may differ across perspectives—that is, different facts obtain relative to different perspectives.

¹These could be either contexts of utterance or contexts of evaluation.

Each of these varieties admits of further subdivisions differing in implementational detail.

Indexical relativism is uncontroversial. Propositional relativism, on the other hand, is in stark opposition to the orthodox view that once a context, or ‘world’, of evaluation is fixed, a proposition has a determinate truth-value.

The range of phenomena that has recently prompted philosophers to deviate from the orthodoxy and plead for propositional relativism includes the possibility of faultless disagreement about the truth of propositions concerning matters of taste as well as the apparent variation of truth-value of propositions about the future and epistemic modality across contexts of assessment.

I argue that these as well as other similar phenomena can be accounted for by appeal to factual relativism which, at least semantically, is more in line with the Fregean orthodoxy. The account I propose draws on a framework I developed elsewhere to model factual relativism.²

Further, I argue that on its most plausible construals, propositional relativism reduces to either indexical or factual relativism.

The coherence of propositional relativism is sometimes motivated by pointing to an analogy between perspectives and possible worlds: Propositions are not true simpliciter but only relative to a possible world. The idea that propositional truth is relative to some parameter is therefore not in itself objectionable. Perspectives are to play a role analogous to, yet relevantly different from possible worlds in determining the truth-value of propositions. The crucial question is what exactly perspectives *do*—how they interact with the facts—so as to determine propositional truth. The analogy between possible worlds and perspectives had better not be too close, for propositional truth is relative to possible worlds because the latter determine a range of facts. And clearly, whether or not a proposition is true depends on the facts the proposition represents as obtaining. If perspectives merely do more of the same work possible worlds do, then propositional truth is relative to perspectives because the *facts* are relative to a perspective and so propositional relativism reduces to factual relativism. Thus, for

², (forthcoming)

propositional relativism to be a distinct position, the role of perspectives has to be construed differently. But how?

Suppose the facts are fixed independently of perspectives. Then there are two roles perspectives could play in determining the truth of a proposition.

First, they could fix *what* state of affairs a proposition represents as obtaining. Then different facts are relevant for the evaluation of the proposition relative to different perspectives. This position has two undesirable features.

(a) It presupposes a non-standard construal of propositions, on which they are not individuated solely by reference to the states of affairs they represent. Suppose, for instance, we take ‘I wear glasses at t_0 ’ to express a proposition independent of a context of utterance—a kind of first-personal proposition not bound to any particular person. That ‘proposition’ does not have a truth-value independently of any first-person perspective even if all the facts about who wears glasses when are given. If we assume that some propositions (say those about matters of taste and those expressed by future contingents) behave like these imagined first-personal propositions, we do get propositional relativism, but at a significant cost. For on this construal, it is not clear what propositions are supposed to be about—they cannot serve, it seems, to communicate any particular content.

(b) The second undesirable feature of the position is that it reduces propositional relativism to indexical relativism: Just as the sentence-token ‘I wear glasses at t_0 ’ expresses a particular proposition (which represents a certain state of affairs) only relative to a context of utterance, the propositions expressed by a particular utterance of, say, ‘Fury will win the race next Tuesday’, or ‘Vegemite tastes great’ represent different states of affairs relative to different (temporal or first-personal) perspectives.

Second, it could be maintained that the representational content of certain propositions (say those about matters of taste or those involving epistemic possibility or future contingents) goes beyond what the (actual, present, non-modal) facts settle. The idea here is that the world provides a range of basic facts but fails to settle all the facts our ordinary talk is manifestly about. For instance, the world may provide all the categorical

(non-modal) facts, or all the natural facts or all the facts about physical particles and their behavior, yet not determine the modal facts, or the aesthetic facts, or all the facts about what is epistemically possible. So there are no 'real' facts of the matter as to whether Vegemite tastes great, Bob might be in Boston or Fury will win next Tuesday. Perspectives, then, bridge the gap between the facts and the surplus content of propositions concerning such indeterminate matters.

This position, however, collapses into factual relativism, for the most natural diagnosis would be to say that certain kinds of *facts* (say facts concerning taste, ontology, future contingents or epistemic modalities) are perspective-relative.