

# Indexical Relativism versus Genuine Relativism

*Max Kölbel*

## Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to characterize and compare two forms any relativist thesis can take: indexical relativism and genuine relativism. Indexical relativists claim that the implicit indexicality of certain sentences is the only source of relativity. Genuine relativists, by contrast, claim that there is relativity not just at the level of sentences, but also at propositional level. After characterizing each of the two forms and discussing their difficulties, I argue that the difference between the two is significant.

**Keywords:** relativism; moral relativism; indexicality; truth; Gilbert Harman; Gareth Evans

Most work on relativism focuses on the debate between opponents and defenders of some relativist thesis. This article is different, for it concerns a debate *among* relativists as to what precise form their relativism ought to take. The main contention of this paper is modest. The main claim for which I want to argue is the claim that there is a significant difference between two broad forms a relativist thesis can take: that of *indexical relativism* and that of *genuine relativism*. This does not mean, however, that the following will be an esoteric discussion directed only at relativists. A clarification of the precise claims relativists might make will be of crucial interest to relativists and opponents alike.

The two forms of relativism I shall discuss differ mainly in their diagnosis of the source of the relativity in question. Indexical relativists locate all relativity at the level of sentences, while genuine relativists claim that there is relativity also at the level of utterances and the contents or thoughts thereby expressed. Indexical relativists about, say, morality will hold that moral relativity is essentially a matter of moral sentences expressing different contents on different occasions of use. Moral sentences are thus very similar to indexical sentences in that the context of utterance determines which content is expressed by any utterance of them. Thus the same moral sentence can express one content and be true in one context of utterance, while it may

express a different content and be false in another context. Indexical relativists claim that all relativity is of this sort, and that there is no residual relativity at the level of individual utterances and the contents expressed by them. Genuine moral relativists do not claim that moral sentences behave generally like indexical sentences. They say that moral sentences express the same contents in all contexts of utterance (unless they are indexical for the usual reasons), but that these contents have their truth-values relatively, i.e. vary in truth-value with parameter of evaluation.

I start by attempting a general definition of relativism with which I hope all relativists and their serious-minded opponents can agree.<sup>1</sup> In section 2 I then provide a characterization of indexical relativism. In order to facilitate, and make more concrete, subsequent discussions, I shall define two representative versions of indexical relativism, SIR and HIR. In section 3 I then raise a series of difficulties for both versions of indexical relativism. These difficulties may move some to reject indexical relativism. However, they are not unanswerable. The purpose of raising them in this paper is simply to demonstrate the important differences between indexical relativism and genuine relativism. In section 4, I then characterize genuine relativism and show how it does not suffer from the sort of difficulties earlier raised for indexical relativism. In section 5, I discuss a major difficulty faced by genuine relativism, Evans' objection, and address how it can be overcome. In the final section I conclude that the two forms are indeed significantly different.

## 1 General Characterization of Relativism

A general definition of relativism is no trivial matter, for various reasons. First, the sheer variety of claims that have been called 'relativist' makes it difficult to find a non-trivial core of theses that is shared by all relativists. Secondly, 'relativism' is sometimes used as a term of abuse. Those who use the term in this way might object to any definition of relativism that classifies as relativistic theses they regard as too reasonable-looking. Thirdly and relatedly, opponents of relativism frequently use unfavourable definitions of relativism as a starting point for their objections. The characterization of relativism that follows is therefore inevitably partly stipulative in character. It aims to make relativism about a given subject a thesis that can, at least in some areas and at first sight, be attractive and coherent. It aims to capture the essence of what many of those who call themselves 'relativists' want to defend.

Every relativist will claim that the possession of some feature is relative to some parameter.<sup>2</sup> Einstein, for example, claims that whether a pair of events is simultaneous is relative to a frame of reference. Relativists about justification might claim that it is relative to a method whether a belief is justified. A relativist about logical validity might claim that whether an argument is logically valid is relative to a choice of logical

constants. By saying that it is relative to a choice of logical constants whether an inference is logically valid, the relativist means (at least) that it depends on the choice of a set of logical constants whether an argument is logically valid. In other words, to say that an argument is logically valid *without* specifying a set of logical constants is to say something that is indeterminate in the sense of being neither correct nor incorrect.<sup>3</sup> If, however, one does specify a set of logical constants, what one says is no longer indeterminate. Thus any relativist will be committed to a thesis of the following form:

- (i) It is relative to  $P$  whether a thing has feature  $F$ .

Whatever replaces  $P$  indicates a range of things  $p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n$  (such as frames of reference, methods, etc.), and to be relative to  $P$  is to depend on specification of one of the things in that range.

I cannot here provide more details on the nature of this dependence, or on the precise relationship between a claim that  $a$  is  $F$  and a claim that  $a$  is  $F$  in relation to  $p_1$ . Different relativists will have different views on this. For instance, indexical relativists about  $F$ -ness will think that the expression ‘the claim that  $a$  is  $F$ ’ is elliptical for, or is co-referential with, an expression ‘the claim that  $a$  is  $F$  in relation to  $p_i$ ’ (for some  $p_i$  indicated by the context). But other relativists might think differently.

Every relativist thesis, then, on the conception of relativism I am operating with, involves some claim that can be seen as an instance of (i). However, in my characterization of relativism, I still want to exclude two types of trivial limiting case. First, consider a situation where some instance of (i) holds, but where all parameters in range  $P$  are unanimous. In other words, which parameter in the range is chosen does not make any difference, because there is no pair of parameters  $p_1$  and  $p_2$  in the range  $P$  such that some  $x$  has  $F$  in relation to  $p_1$  but not in relation to  $p_2$ . Insisting on the relativist thesis of form (i) would be entirely pointless in such a case, and the resulting relativism would be trivial. Thus I propose to add the following clause to our schematic characterization of relativism:

- (ii) There is at least one  $x$  and parameters  $p_i, p_j$  which belong to  $P$ , such that  $x$  has  $F$  in relation to  $p_i$ , but not in relation to  $p_j$ .

This also precludes cases where there is only one parameter in the range  $P$ . Another trivial limiting case occurs when only one of the the parameters in the range is somehow correct, or relevant for the assessment as correct of claims regarding  $F$ -ness. If that were so, then there would never be a situation where something could be correctly described as  $F$  in relation to one parameter from the range but as not  $F$  in relation to another. Thus let’s add one more clause:

- (iii) There is no uniquely relevant choice of parameter.

My characterization of relativism does *not* contain a further condition along the following lines:

- (iv) For every  $x$  there are choices of parameter  $p_i, p_j$  which belong to  $P$ , such that  $x$  has  $F$  in relation to  $p_i$ , but not in relation to  $p_j$ .

There may well be relativists who accept this further condition.<sup>4</sup> I see no reason to include (iv) in my characterization, but plenty of reason against: paradigm relativists, for instance Harman, would not qualify as relativists if (iv) were added.<sup>5</sup>

We can then define relativism as follows:

- (DR) For all  $F$ : a view counts as relativism about  $F$ -ness just if it is committed to claims of the form (i)–(iii).<sup>6</sup>

This characterization of relativism does not entail that relativism about a feature  $F$  involves the claim that one cannot be in error about whether something has  $F$ . Again, the impossibility of error may be a consequence of some (extreme) relativist theses. But there is no reason to suppose that every relativist is committed to it. I do not know of any relativist who clearly defends such a claim. Protagoras is depicted by Plato as being committed to the impossibility of error, and this is surely an interesting position to discuss. But again, there is no need to saddle all relativists with this radical thesis. For all we know, even Plato's attribution of this view to Protagoras may have been a slander (compare Barnes, 1982: p. 542).

## 2 Indexical Relativism

One can be a relativist in many areas – e.g. a moral relativist, an aesthetic relativist, a relativist about justification or about logical consequence, etc. My claims in this paper concerning the differences between indexical and genuine relativism are supposed to apply to relativism in all areas. The contrast between indexical and genuine relativism arises in all of these areas. But for ease of exposition I shall use relativism about morality as my central example. What I have to say about indexical and genuine relativism concerning morality should carry over to relativism in other areas.

Any moral relativist, let's suppose, will want to claim that it is relative to some range of parameters whether things have moral features, and will do so in accordance with the definition of relativism offered in section 1. For example, any moral relativist will claim that it is relative to some parameter whether Blair ought to go to war. *Indexical* moral relativists distinguish themselves by offering one particular explanation for this relativity. They

hold that moral sentences exhibit the kind of context-dependence also exhibited by indexical sentences. The context of utterance determines which (if any) proposition is expressed by an utterance of a moral sentence, and this is the sole source of relativity here. Just as the sentence ‘My guinea-pig loves dandelions’ will express, and can be used to assert, different propositions in different contexts of utterance, the sentence ‘Blair ought to go to war’ will also express different propositions depending on the context in which it is uttered.

I would like to outline two different versions of such an indexical moral relativism, two versions that are, I hope, representative of the whole spectrum of possible views. The first version is quite simple and is perhaps the first view that comes to mind when one thinks about indexical relativism. I do not know any philosopher who holds exactly this view. It will, however, be instructive to discuss it. Let’s call it ‘SIR’, short for ‘simple indexical relativism’. According to SIR, when I utter

(B) Blair ought to go to war,

I assert exactly the same proposition I would have asserted had I uttered

(B\*) My moral code requires Blair to go to war.<sup>7</sup>

Here I would like to introduce the following abbreviation: to say that two assertoric sentences are *propositionally equivalent* is just to say that in any context one would assert the same proposition were one to utter the one as one would have asserted had one uttered the other. Then we can say conveniently that according to SIR, (B) and (B\*) are propositionally equivalent. In general, SIR is the claim that any sentence of the form ‘A ought to do x’ is propositionally equivalent to the corresponding sentence of the form ‘My moral code requires A to do x.’

The second version of indexical moral relativism is more complex, but removes some of the more obvious weaknesses of SIR. Let’s call it ‘HIR’, short for ‘Harman–Dreier-style indexical relativism’ because it is essentially the view put forward by Harman (1975) and Dreier (1990). According to HIR, when I utter (B), I assert the same proposition I would have asserted had I uttered

(B\*\*) The moral code shared by you (the audience), me (the speaker) and Blair requires Blair to go to war.

Again, HIR’s general claim is that any sentence of the form ‘A ought to do x’ is propositionally equivalent to the corresponding sentence of the form ‘The moral code shared by you (the audience), me (the speaker) and A requires A to do x.’

The sentences offered by SIR and HIR as propositional equivalents of moral sentences contain definite descriptions. Something needs to be said, therefore, about the treatment of these descriptions – are they to be understood in a Russellian or a Strawsonian fashion? Let me briefly explain the difference with an example. Suppose I utter the sentence ‘My guinea-pig loves dandelions.’ If I do have a guinea-pig, then my utterance is an assertion, in *some* sense, *about* that guinea-pig. But what happens if I don’t have a guinea-pig? A Strawsonian would say that in that case my utterance is defective and does not succeed in expressing a proposition. This is so because my having a unique guinea-pig is a precondition for an utterance of the sentence to express a proposition (a semantic presupposition, in the terminology of Soames, 1989). Russellians, by contrast, think that when I utter the sentence, one of the things I thereby say is that I have a unique guinea-pig. When someone utters ‘My guinea-pig loves dandelions’, they thereby assert the quantified proposition that there is a unique guinea-pig they own and that any guinea-pig they own loves dandelions. If they don’t own a guinea-pig, then what they have asserted is simply false.

The two alternative readings also present themselves in the case of (B\*) and (B\*\*). On a Russellian reading, an utterance of (B\*\*) expresses the quantified proposition that there is a unique moral code shared by speaker, audience and Blair which requires Blair to go to war. This proposition is false if there is no such moral code. On a Strawsonian reading, an utterance of (B\*\*) only expresses a proposition if there is a unique moral code shared by these people. Thus the existence of a shared moral code figures as a (semantic) presupposition. In contexts of utterance where this presupposition is not met, utterances of (B\*\*) are deficient: they express no proposition at all.

Some of the things Harman and Dreier say suggest that their view is a Strawsonian version of HIR. According to Harman, for example, we cannot say that Hitler ought not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews because Hitler does not share the relevant moral considerations with us: Hitler is ‘beyond the pale’ (1975: p. 7; see also Dreier, 1990: p. 570). In what follows I shall therefore address mostly the Strawsonian reading of HIR.

Before I move on to the difficulties faced by SIR and HIR, let me point out some of their advantages. Clearly, one advantage is that indexical relativists can assimilate the relativity exhibited by moral sentences to the well-understood phenomenon of indexicality. Moral sentences merely exhibit a form of context-dependence that we already understand very well, and which causes no major problems.<sup>8</sup> This is surely one of the things Harman has in mind when he calls his view a ‘soberly logical thesis’ (1975: p. 3). All relativity is confined to sentence types. The propositions expressed by sentence tokens are propositions with absolute truth-values that are in no way metaphysically suspect. They just describe how things are factually: which set of moral principles requires which course of action. Despite

appearances, moral sentences do not express genuinely moral propositions, and thus we are not saddled with ‘queer’ non-objective moral propositions or facts.

Another advantage claimed for indexical relativism by both Harman and Dreier (see Harman, 1975 and Dreier, 1990) is the explanation it provides for the motivational character of moral judgements. If the judgement expressed by, say, ‘I ought to go to war’ is true, then the person making the judgement has a moral code, i.e. a set of motivating attitudes, which require them to go to war. Clearly, making such a judgement therefore provides one with a subjective reason to go to war.

### 3 Difficulties with Indexical Relativism: Distortion of Topic

Both SIR and HIR distort the topic of moral utterances. According to SIR, when I say ‘Blair ought to go to war’, I assert that my moral code requires Blair to go to war. I am therefore talking *about* my moral code. However, this seems wrong: I talk about Blair and what he ought to do, and *not* about my moral code and what it requires Blair to do. A similar complaint can be made about HIR: if I say ‘Blair ought to go to war’, I thereby assert that the moral code shared by my, audience, me and Blair requires him to go to war. However, this seems intuitively wrong: I am not talking about any moral code shared by me, the audience and Blair. Rather, I am just talking about Blair and what he ought to do.

The proponent of indexical relativism will respond that this begs the question against him. The indexical relativist is putting forward a view precisely on the question of which propositions are expressed by moral sentences; thus, directly invoking intuitions about the nature of the propositions asserted will not convince the indexical relativist.

However, the complaint that indexical relativists distort the topic can be given more substance. Let’s concentrate on SIR for one moment. One fact that the SIR theorist might try to cite in his own favour is the apparent pragmatic equivalence of (B) and (B\*): whenever it is appropriate to utter the one, it is also appropriate to utter the other. And conversely, it would seem to be distinctly odd to utter the one and and conjoin it with the negation of the other. If, however, we found a situation in which (B) is appropriate and (B\*) is not, or vice versa, then that would count against SIR. Similarly, it would count against SIR if there were situations in which one of the two sentences could be appropriately uttered along with the negation of the other.

The situation is reminiscent of the fallacy according to which ‘I believe that *p*’ and ‘*p*’ express the same proposition because they appear to be pragmatically equivalent: whenever it is appropriate to utter the one, it is also appropriate to utter the other. Moreover, uttering the one and conjoining it with the negation of the other results in incoherence. The problem is that

apparent pragmatic equivalence does not guarantee sameness of the proposition expressed. Imagine a situation where I believe that my friend has betrayed me but my friend hasn't betrayed me. In this situation the proposition I express by uttering 'I believe that my friend has betrayed me' is true, while the proposition expressed by my utterance of 'My friend has betrayed me' is false. They must therefore be distinct propositions. Similarly, while 'I believe that  $p$  but not- $p$ ' is incoherent, 'I believed that  $p$ , but not- $p$ ' and 'he believes that  $p$ , but not- $p$ ' are not. Even though 'I believe that  $p$ ' and ' $p$ ' are usually pragmatically equivalent, they nevertheless express different propositions.

We can apply a similar line of reasoning in the case of SIR. Imagine a situation where one moral thinker, Aznar, has a moral code that requires Blair to go to war, while another moral thinker, Fischer, has a moral code that does not require Blair to go to war. Imagine further that this is known by Fischer. Now Aznar utters both (B) and (B\*). Fischer would (without irrationality) reject what Aznar expressed by (B), while he would accept what Aznar expressed by (B\*). SIR, however, rules this out: according to it, Aznar's utterance of (B) expresses the same proposition as his utterance of (B\*). I regard this at least as a disadvantage. SIR does not seem to be a theory that captures how we are currently using moral sentences. If SIR were descriptively correct of our usage, we would use (B) as if it were *about* the utterer's moral code. But we don't.<sup>9</sup>

The same difficulty arises, *mutatis mutandis*, for HIR. Consider a situation where Aznar utters (B) and (B\*\*) addressing Bush. Fischer knows that Aznar, Bush and Blair share a moral code which in fact requires Blair to go to war. Fischer will rationally want to reject the proposition expressed by Aznar's utterance of (B) while accepting the proposition expressed by his utterance of (B\*\*). HIR, however, says that that is impossible: both utterances express the same proposition. Thus, just as before: if HIR were descriptively correct, we would use (B) as if it were *about* the attitude shared by speaker, audience and agent referred to. But we don't.<sup>10</sup>

This problem of distortion of topic is not fatal for indexical relativism. What it does show, however, is that indexical relativism *does* introduce a substantial thesis about the *topic* of utterances of the type in question, a thesis that is in tension with what one would pre-theoretically suppose.

Let's look at this from another angle. Suppose you utter (B) and I answer by uttering the negation of (B): 'It is not the case that Blair ought to go to war.' Suppose we are both sincere. According to SIR, we don't disagree any more than we do if you say 'I have a guinea-pig' and I answer 'I don't have a guinea-pig.' This, I believe, is counterintuitive and differs from the way we would usually conceive of the situation. Intuitively, we have contradicted one another.

The SIR theorist will retort that even on his theory there are two senses in which we do indeed contradict each other. First, we contradict each other

in the sense that I have uttered a sentence that is the negation of the sentence you have uttered. Secondly, we contradict one another in the sense that our utterances report that we have moral codes that recommend opposing courses of action.

This, however, is not quite the sense in which we intuitively think that we contradict one another. Intuitively, when you sincerely utter (B) and I sincerely utter the negation, we could not rationally accept what the other has asserted without changing our minds. According to SIR, however, we can just accept what the other has asserted because the propositions asserted are not incompatible.<sup>11</sup>

HIR does not suffer from this precise problem. For in the Strawsonian version it is a precondition for successful expression of a proposition that speaker, audience and agent concerned share a moral code. Thus, if any proposition has been asserted at all, the two parties are in fact disagreeing in the above sense: neither could rationally come to believe what the other asserted without changing their mind. In this respect, HIR is more sophisticated and more plausible.

Nevertheless, HIR too has problems with disagreements. Suppose you utter (B), and I utter the negation. We do in fact share a moral code with Blair, and thus the two utterances do succeed in expressing propositions. You expressed the proposition that our shared moral code requires Blair to go to war, while I expressed the proposition that it does not. Our disagreement must therefore either concern the relevant facts of the situation or the question of how our shared moral code is to be applied to the situation. The disagreement is therefore purely non-moral. However, if there had been a moral disagreement between us, our utterances would not have succeeded in expressing propositions.

Harman bites this bullet: Hitler is beyond the pale, and we cannot make the judgement that he ought not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews, because making that judgement presupposes sharing a moral code with him. I believe that this bullet is a tough one to bite, but what I am interested in here is just the fact that there is a bullet that needs to be bitten – a bullet which a genuine moral relativist does not have to bite.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, indexical moral relativists have to pay a price for the advantages of their view: they have to make revisionary claims about the content of moral utterances and judgements and deal with the consequences of this revision. Whether this is a price worth paying is not the focus of this paper. The important point is *that* this is the price.

#### 4 Genuine Relativism

Unlike indexical relativists, genuine relativists locate relativity at the level of the content of thought and speech. In explaining this view, it will be useful to make a comparison with a framework familiar from Kaplan (1977 and

1989). Kaplan showed that it is crucial to distinguish between a context of use and a circumstance of evaluation.<sup>13</sup> Let's look at an example:

(1) My guinea-pig loves dandelions.

In a given context of use, (1) will express a certain content depending on who utters it at what time. For example, an utterance of (1) by Linda in April 2004 will express a content that concerns the guinea-pig owned by Linda in April 2004. Naturally, whether an utterance of (1) is true will therefore depend in part on the context of use. However, its truth also depends on how things are in the world – on the circumstances of evaluation. Linda's guinea-pig might love dandelions in one possible circumstance and hate them in another. (Moreover, she might own *this* guinea-pig in one possible circumstance and *that* guinea-pig in another.) Thus, the truth of a sentence is not just doubly relative, but relative in two stages: first, the content expressed depends on the context of use, and then the truth-value of *that* content depends on the way the world is.

Indexical moral relativists believe that moral relativity is a dependence of the first kind, i.e. a dependence of content expressed on context of utterance. Genuine moral relativists believe that moral relativity is a form of dependence more akin to Kaplan's second stage. Once the context of utterance has determined which content has been expressed, it still depends on a parameter whether that content is true. The parameter might be a moral code, a set of principles, a perspective, etc. For simplicity, let's talk about relativity to perspectives.<sup>14</sup> Genuine moral relativism, then, is the view that the contents expressed by utterances of moral sentences vary in truth-value from perspective to perspective.

The difference between an indexical and a genuine relativist about morality does not lie in the parameter to which each says that morality is relative. We could have a genuine and an indexical relativist both of whom claim that morality is relative to the same thing, say a moral code. The difference is that the indexical and the genuine relativist view moral utterances as expressing contents of very different sorts. Consider my utterance of

(A) A is morally good.

Let's assume, for simplicity, that 'A' is a non-indexical term for some particular action (e.g. the dropping of the first atomic bomb). According to the genuine relativist, sentence (A) is not indexical or context-dependent. Its Kaplanian 'character' is constant, because it expresses the same content in every context of use. (A) consists of a singular term and a one-place predicate. If we treat contents as if they are Russellian propositions we could say that this content has two constituents, the one-place property of moral goodness and the particular object A. This content, however, will be correct

or true in relation to some moral codes and not correct or true according to other moral codes – just as Kaplan’s contents depend for their truth-value on a circumstance of evaluation.

The indexical relativist, by contrast, holds that (A) is indeed context-sensitive in the sense that it depends on the context of utterance whether and which content is expressed. To adopt a Russellian mode of speaking again, the content expressed by (A) in a given context of utterance will be relational, for the predicate ‘is morally good’ is more than one-place.<sup>15</sup> An indexical relativist of the SIR sort will say that the belief expressed by my utterance of (A) is a belief concerning a relation between A and my moral code. Thus, the difference between genuine and indexical relativism is not a difference in the parameter to which moral sentences are said to be relative.<sup>16</sup>

According to my genuine moral relativist, then, moral beliefs have moral contents which have a truth-value only in relation to a perspective. Before I discuss the problems with this view, let me first point out how this view faces none of the difficulties faced by indexical relativism. Remember that the basic difficulty for indexical relativism was that it distorted the topic of moral talk and thought. When it seems that we speak and think about Blair and what he ought to do, the indexical relativist has to say that in fact we are speaking and thinking about a moral code and what it requires. The genuine relativist just does not have this problem. When someone sincerely utters (B), they are most perspicuously described as asserting that Blair ought to go to war, and the belief they thereby express is most perspicuously described as the belief that Blair ought to go to war.

Another difficulty of indexical relativism was the fact that it had to give a counterintuitive account of moral disagreements. According to SIR, when I sincerely utter (B) and you sincerely utter ‘It’s not the case that Blair ought to go to war’, what I said is not incompatible (in the right way) with what you said. I can just come to believe what you said without needing to change my mind. There is no such problem in the case of genuine relativism. However, I shall need to introduce one further, normative aspect of this theory in order to show how this works: every thinker *possesses* a perspective, and moreover everyone ought not to believe contents that are not true in relation to their own perspective. On this basis, it is clear why I can’t come to believe what you said without needing to change my mind: what you have said and what I have said cannot both be true in relation to the same perspective. Thus, given that I ought not to believe something that is not true in relation to my perspective, I should not come to believe what you have said without changing my mind.

Finally, there was a difficulty which HIR faced with moral assertions about those, or directed at those, whose moral code we do not share. HIR was committed to saying that there are no such assertions because a Strawsonian prerequisite for expressing a proposition was not met.<sup>17</sup> That’s why

we could not make moral judgements about those beyond the pale. Genuine relativism faces no such problem either: it is irrelevant to the question what content is expressed by the utterance of (B) whether the audience or Blair share a moral code with the utterer. I can utter (B) and succeed in thereby expressing a judgement, even if I do not share a moral code with Blair or with my audience. Even Hitler does not escape being the focus of my 'ought'-judgement: my judgement that he ought not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews might not be true in relation to Hitler's perspective, but that does not prevent me from making the judgement, nor does it prevent my judgement from being correct in relation to my perspective.

### 5 Evans' Problem

Even though genuine relativism does not suffer from the problems that plague indexical relativism, it does have difficulties of its own. These difficulties are best brought out by considering an objection raised by Gareth Evans to an analogous proposal, namely the assumption, in tense logic, that the correctness of an utterance can be relative to the time of evaluation (Evans, 1979). Even though Evans' point is formulated as a point about utterances, not contents, and even though the relativity in question is relativity to times, not to perspectives, the essentials of his point apply to the genuine relativist's proposal.

The difficulty Evans sees is this: we must, in making and interpreting assertions, be able to make sense of the idea that the assertion is correct, so that we can aim to assert correctly (as speakers) or expect an assertion to be correct (as audience). However, if it is relative to perspectives whether the content expressed by an assertoric utterance is true, then there seems to be no sense in which the utterance can be correct or incorrect. The only way it could would be either in relation to some particular perspective or in relation to some, most or all perspectives. But if we were aiming for correctness in relation to some specific perspective  $p_1$ , perhaps because it is related in some way to the context of utterance, then correctness would no longer be relative to perspectives because an utterance would be absolutely correct just if it is correct in relation to  $p_1$ . The same goes for the quantificational options: if we were aiming for correctness in relation to some (most, every) perspective, then we would after all have an absolute correctness condition: an utterance is absolutely correct just if it is correct in relation to some (most, every) perspective. Thus, the idea of contents of assertion that have relative correctness (or truth) conditions is incoherent.

Evans is making a good point. The genuine relativist needs to say something about the aim of moral assertions. However, I believe that the threat of incoherence can be averted. Evans' mistake was to assume that every utterance needs to have the same absolute correctness as its aim. However,

why should it not be coherent for me to aim at truth in relation to my perspective and for you to aim at truth in relation to your perspective?

Let me briefly sketch a coherent view of moral communication that could be adopted by a genuine relativist. First, every thinker aims at truth from their own perspective. Truth is thus a norm in the following sense:

- (N) It is a mistake to believe a content that is not true from one's own perspective.

Secondly, language users usually obey the following two rules:

- (S) Assert a content only if you believe it.  
 (J) Justify an assertion if asked to do so.<sup>18</sup>

For current purposes, it is enough to assume that language users usually obey (N) and (J), and that it is common knowledge that they do.

On these assumptions, individual thinkers primarily aim to believe only contents that are true in their perspective, so there is no lack of aim at the level of thought. But thinkers can also communicate their moral beliefs effectively and for a good purpose. Here are a few ways in which they can use assertions of moral contents.

First, when someone asserts a moral content, the audience might reason as follows: the speaker probably believes the content asserted, because she is probably obeying (S). She is generally a competent moral thinker in the following sense: when she believes a moral content, it is usually true in her perspective. Finally, her perspective and my perspective, agree in moral matters. Therefore, probably what she has asserted is true in my perspective, and thus (given perhaps that the issue has relevance or interest for me) I do well in starting to believe it. This reasoning need not be explicit.

Secondly, I might desire to get my audience to start believing some moral content. I might predict that asserting that content will set in motion the sort of reasoning process just described, resulting in the audience coming to believe that content. I therefore assert the content in question. Again, this reasoning need not be explicit.

Thirdly, I might, upon witnessing an assertion of a moral content, request justification, perhaps because I found that my trust in the reliability of the asserter is not sufficiently great to warrant coming to believe what she asserted (given perhaps that I have incompatible beliefs). Or because I want to learn more about the sort of considerations that support a belief like that. A moral discussion might ensue. Mistakes in the justification for the content originally asserted might be uncovered. Or mistakes might be uncovered in my justification for the incompatible contents I originally believed etc.

I believe that this sketch suffices to show that operating with a genuinely relativistic notion of contents of speech and thought is not incoherent. Contrary to Evans, even if, on this view, an individual *S* aims to believe only contents that are true in his own perspective, this does not show that these contents have absolute correctness conditions. For other individuals will not necessarily aim for truth in *S*'s perspective. Thus, operating with contents of assertion that have their truth-values relatively is coherent.

The notion of a content of belief and assertion whose truth-value is relative clearly goes against orthodoxy.<sup>19</sup> However, there are no principled reasons why orthodoxy shouldn't be challenged in this case. Moreover, there are precedents in the semantics of tensed sentences where, I believe, the orthodoxy has been successfully challenged.<sup>20</sup> So Evans' Problem can be overcome.

## 6 Conclusion

Clearly, then, there are significant differences between indexical and genuine relativism. First, the two indexical forms of moral relativism I considered face a number of difficulties (none of which may be impossible to overcome). Corresponding genuine forms of relativism do not face these problems. Genuine forms of relativism in turn face their own problems: they need to challenge the orthodoxy that utterances and their contents have absolute truth-values. Indexical relativists do not face this problem. I believe that this demonstrates that there is a significant difference between the two forms of relativism.<sup>21</sup>

*University of Birmingham, UK*

## Notes

- 1 Those who find section 1 tedious are invited to skip it and to move directly to section 2, where the main body of the paper starts.
- 2 I say 'feature' and not 'property' in order not to build into relativism the idea that something the possession of which is relative can count as a genuine property. My definition is neutral with respect to this issue.
- 3 I am speaking deliberately of correctness here, and not of truth. This is in order not to rule out by definition those relativists who think that whether something has the feature in question is not a matter of truth or falsehood.
- 4 E.g. Hales, 1997; see Kölbel, 1999 for comment.
- 5 Some opponents of relativism, e.g. Mackie, 1964, assume (iv) and use it against relativism. See Kölbel, 2002, Ch. 7.4 for detailed discussion.
- 6 This definition classifies some unexpected theses as relativistic: for example, standard theories of indexicals, such as Kaplan's, qualify as relativism about being a true sentence. Realist possible world theories of modality might also count as relativism about being a true proposition. However, actualists about modality won't qualify because they don't meet clause (iii).

- 7 I am deliberately saying *merely* that utterance of the two sentences results in assertion of the same proposition, and *not* that the two sentences are synonymous, because Dreier explicitly distinguishes the former from the latter claim. See Dreier, 1999: p. 567.
- 8 My characterization of HIR and SIR has been silent on the exact semantic mechanism of how an utterance of (B) comes to express the same proposition that would have been expressed by an utterance of (B\*) or, in the case of HIR, (B\*\*). Clearly, there is a range of choices here. For example, 'ought' might be viewed as more than two-place, in which case rules governing ellipsis might explain how utterances of (B) can express the propositions they do. Or 'ought' might be viewed as implicitly indexical. I can't address these finer issues on this occasion. Thanks to Stefano Predelli for discussion.
- 9 No doubt, the SIR theorist could respond by complicating SIR and thereby trying to accommodate some of the phenomena. He could say that while (B) and (B\*) are propositionally equivalent, they do nevertheless behave differently in a number of contexts. When Fischer says 'That's not true' in response to Aznar's utterance of (B), and 'That's true' in response to his utterance of (B\*), then we need to use different rules to interpret each instance of the anaphoric 'that'. In the first case, when Fischer says 'That's not true' to Aznar's 'Blair ought to go to war', 'that' picks out the proposition Fischer would have expressed had he uttered what Aznar uttered. In the second case, when Fischer says 'That's true' to Aznar's 'My moral code requires Blair to go to war', 'that' picks out the proposition Aznar expressed (just the way we usually suppose that the anaphoric 'that' works). This accounts for the impression that Fischer's being right requires that Aznar's utterances express different propositions: Fischer's two utterances of 'that' do refer to different propositions; however, the first of these is not the proposition Aznar expressed.
- This sort of move, while not incoherent, is unattractive. It certainly looks as if the SIR theorist needs to make many more epicyclical adjustments in order to preserve his or her thesis that (B) and (B\*) are propositionally equivalent. Similar adjustments will be necessary for other contexts, such as embedding in propositional attitude reports – how to interpret, for example, 'He said that Blair ought to go to war'.
- 10 No doubt, the HIR theorist can at this point make moves analogous to the ones sketched for SIR in the previous footnote.
- 11 A supporter of 'egocentric propositions' such as John Pollock (1982) could object that we cannot just accept what the other has asserted. What they have asserted is an egocentric proposition, a proposition that is accessible only to one person. This point, however, does not improve the situation for the SIR theorist. For even on a theory like Pollock's, egocentric propositions have counterparts that are accessible to others. Thus even when an egocentric proposition is asserted, there is an analogue of 'accepting what has been said', namely accepting a counterpart of the egocentric proposition asserted. The problem then arises again: according to SIR, you and I can both come to believe the counterpart of the proposition asserted by the other; however, intuitively it should not be possible for me just to accept what you said (and vice versa). Thanks to Dan Lopez de Sa for putting this objection to me.
- 12 There are many bizarre consequences of Harman's view in this area: for example, suppose I say 'Blair ought to resign' to you, who share a moral code with me and Blair. If someone with a different moral code now enters the room and I utter the sentence again, now addressing the expanded audience, I suddenly no longer succeed in expressing a proposition. However, these bullets can all be bitten.

- 13 A distinction between the two types of dependence is necessary in order to account for the fact that a sentence like 'I am here now', even though true in all contexts, is not true necessarily. See Kaplan, 1977: p. 509.
- 14 One way of construing genuine relativism is to say that moral relativism is relativity to Kaplan's circumstances of evaluation. However, this presumably requires a view of circumstances of evaluation that is radically different from the usual view of circumstances of evaluation as possible worlds. Thus I prefer, for the moment, to introduce a separate form of relativity, namely to a perspective.
- 15 Compare Harman, 1975: p. 10. See also n. 8 above.
- 16 Kaplan has a very good rationale for separating the two kinds of relativity (to contexts of use and to circumstances of evaluation): it accounts for the fact that we would not accept 'Necessarily I am here' even though 'I am here' is true in every context of use. My rationale for introducing relativity to perspectives is different. There are certain aspects of language use which motivate the move. Roughly, our tendency to treat some contents of thought as objective and some as not objective can best be accounted for within a genuine relativistic framework. I have made a detailed case for this in Kölbel, 2002 and also in Kölbel, 2003. Perhaps my motivation can be translated into the sort of motivation Kaplan uses: perhaps the rules concerning the operators 'Objectively ...' or 'T faultlessly believes that ...' require that sentences express contents whose truth-values vary with perspectives. However, I cannot here elaborate this line of thought. Compare Kaplan, 1977: pp. 503–4.
- 17 A Russellian analogue of HIR would have the analogous problem that our moral assertions about Hitler come out as false, no matter what we think he ought or ought not to have done.
- 18 I am not sure whether I need both rules to explain moral communication. However, the point here is not to provide the most elegant account of moral assertion, but to demonstrate that the idea of contents with relative truth-values is coherent.
- 19 See for example, Frege, 1906: p. 202.
- 20 See, for example, Prior, 1962 and very recently MacFarlane, 2003.
- 21 Talks overlapping with this paper have been presented at the Department of Logic and Philosophy of Science at the University of Barcelona in February 2003, in the Seminars in Moral Philosophy at Oxford University in April 2003, at the Relativism conference organised by the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin in May 2003 and at GAP5 in Bielefeld in September 2003. I would like to thank the audiences for their many helpful comments, especially Lars Bergström, John Broome, Krister Bykvist, José Diez, Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Wolfgang Kühne. Thanks for detailed discussion on specific points go to Dan Lopez de Sa and Stefano Predelli.

## References

- Barnes, Jonathan, (1982) *The Presocratic Philosophers* revised edn, London: Routledge.
- Dreier, James (1990) 'Internalism and Speaker Relativism', *Ethics* 101: 6–26.
- (1999) 'Transforming Expressivism', *Nous* 33: 558–72.
- Evans, Gareth (1979) 'Does Tense Logic Rest on a Mistake?', in his *Collected Papers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.
- Frege, Gottlob (1906) 'Einleitung in die Logik', in H. Hermes et al. (eds) *Nachgelassene Schriften*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1983, pp. 201–12; English

INDEXICAL RELATIVISM VERSUS GENUINE RELATIVISM

- translation: 'Introduction to Logic', in P. Long and R. White (trans) *Posthumous Writings*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1979, pp. 185–96.
- Hales, Steven D. (1997) 'A Consistent Relativism', *Mind* 106: 33–52.
- Harman, Gilbert (1975) 'Moral Relativism Defended', *Philosophical Review* 84: 3–22. Reprinted in M. Krausz and J. Meiland, *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, London: University of Notre Dame Press 1982.
- Kaplan, David (1977) 'Demonstratives', in J. Almog et al. (eds) *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- (1989) 'Afterthoughts', in J. Almog et al. (eds) *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kölbel, Max (1999) 'Saving Relativism from its Saviour', *Critica* 31: 91–103.
- (2002) *Truth Without Objectivity*, London: Routledge.
- (2003) 'Faultless Disagreement', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104: 53–73.
- MacFarlane, John (2003) 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth', *Philosophical Quarterly* 53: 321–36.
- Mackie, J. L. (1964) 'Self-Refutation – A Formal Analysis', *Philosophical Quarterly* 14: 193–203.
- Pollock, John (1982) *Language and Thought*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Prior, Arthur N. (1962) 'Changes in Events and Changes in Things', Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas. Reprinted in A. N. Prior, *Papers on Time and Tense*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.
- Soames, Scott (1989) 'Presupposition', in D. Gabbay and F. Guentner (eds) *Handbook of Philosophical Logic*, Volume 4: *Topics in the Philosophy of Language*, Dordrecht: Reidel, pp. 553–616.