

Part I

Characterizing Relativism

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Global Relativism and Self-Refutation

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Abstract

Relativism, in particular global relativism, is often said to be “self-refuting.” In fact, there are several different shortcomings that may be meant by the term “self-refuting.” The purpose of this chapter is to survey and assess some interesting ways in which some forms of relativism may be thought to be self-refuting. I begin by clarifying what can be meant by “self-refutation,” and by providing a definition of “relativism” to work with. Since self-refutation is usually thought to be a problem specifically for *global* forms of relativism, my preliminaries will include a section that clarifies the senses in which a relativistic doctrine might be global. With the preliminaries out of the way, I consider, in sections 4 and 5, certain fundamental difficulties faced by global forms of relativism and how they might be avoided. Sections 6 and 7 then move on to an assessment of several different self-refutation arguments against relativism. The result of the investigation will be that any form of global relativism that manages to avoid the more fundamental difficulties discussed in sections 4 and 5 has little to fear from self-refutation objections.

1. Self-Refutation

The dialectical notion of self-refutation (*peritrope*) originates in the early Hellenistic period (third century BC, see Burnyeat 1976a). Arguments against relativism that have been styled “self-refutation arguments” go back further, for example to Plato (*Theaetetus* 171a–b) and Aristotle (*Metaphysics* Γ 1008a 28–30, 1012b 12–18, K 1063b 30–5) and even, according to Epicurus, to Democritus. The general idea of self-refutation seems to be that a claim is self-refuting if it can in some way be turned against itself. This might involve the content of the self-refuting claim entailing its own falsity, either on its own or in conjunction with further premises. Alternatively, it might mean that

making the claim (perhaps making it in a certain way) somehow entails its falsity or else commits the person making it to its falsity. Or, finally, it might mean that the claim cannot be defended in a debate that is conducted according to certain dialectical rules.

It will be worth pausing briefly to appreciate these subtle and perhaps initially confusing distinctions. Consider the following sentence:

(L) What I am saying at this moment is false.

Suppose I uttered (L). I would then be claiming that what I am saying is false. Thus what I have claimed entails that my claim is false. Thus, my claim would be self-refuting in the first sense mentioned above: the content of the claim entails its falsehood. (NB: the difficulties with (L) go far beyond this: consider the assumption that my claim is false.)

Another example. Consider Would-be-Socrates, who claims to know that he does not know anything. We can again use what he has claimed as a premise in an argument that shows that what he has claimed is false:

- (P1) Would-be-Socrates knows that he does not know anything. (That's what he has claimed.)
- (P2) What is known is true. (This is an additional a priori premise.)
- (C1) So, Would-be-Socrates does not know anything. (Follows from P1 and P2)
- (C2) So, in particular, Would-be-Socrates does not know that he does not know anything. (Follows from C1)

Thus, we have used what Would-be-Socrates has claimed (the content of his claim) together with a further a priori premise, to deduce that what he has claimed is false.

However, traditional self-refutation arguments usually seem to involve a charge that is subtler than the charge of direct or indirect self-contradiction. Consider a different example. Many of us are familiar with situations where someone shouts the following sentence at the top of their voice:

(S) I am *not* shouting.

It would be correct (though in many cases not prudent) to point out to such a person that their shouting is “pragmatically self-refuting” (Passmore 1961; Mackie 1964): the fact that they are *shouting* the sentence refutes *what* they are shouting, namely that they are not shouting. However, what they are shouting (the content of their claim) is in no way self-contradictory. For they could have made the very same claim – asserted the very same content: that they are not shouting – in a calm voice, or they could have remained silent altogether. In either case it would have been true that they are not shouting.

Some sentences are worse off than (S), in that one cannot use them to make a true assertion (NB: this is not the same as saying that the *content* expressed by such a sentence in a context could not be true). For example, the sentence “I am not saying (claiming, asserting) anything.” No one can truly say (claim, assert) that they are not

claiming (claiming, asserting) anything. We could call contents of this sort “necessarily pragmatically self-refuting.”

The difference between self-contradictory and pragmatically self-refuting claims (of both kinds) may seem subtle, but it is in fact important. From the fact that a certain content is self-contradictory, one can normally safely conclude that that content is false, as in the case of P1. (The case of (L) is special: here, even the conclusion that what was claimed is false leads to a contradiction. This is what makes the liar sentence so troublesome.) However, we cannot conclude from the fact that it would be pragmatically self-refuting to assert a certain content that that content is therefore false. If I don’t assert anything, then it is true that I am not asserting anything. If I don’t shout, then it’s true that I am not shouting. Analogously, by the way, if I were to think that I am not thinking, I would be wrong. Does it follow that I *am* thinking?

There is yet another way in which a claim can be said to be self-refuting. Making a claim or an assertion is often thought to engender certain normative requirements. Thus, for example, it is sometimes thought that one ought to assert a content only if one believes it (e.g. Searle 1969), or only if one has reasons for believing it, or even that one ought to assert only what one knows (Williamson 1996; 2000). Let us assume the last of these views for the sake of argument. If assertion is governed by the norm that one ought to assert only what one knows, then for anything one asserts, one commits oneself to knowing it. One undergoes this commitment in the sense that one can be legitimately criticized, and perhaps forced to withdraw an assertion, if one has asserted a content one does not know. Now, if the content of an assertion is incompatible with this commitment, then that content is self-refuting in yet another way, which we might label “con conversationally self-refuting.”

Consider again the self-contradictory claim made by Would-be-Socrates above: that he knows that he knows nothing. Suppose Would-be-Socrates retreats to a less problematic second assertion, namely the claim that he knows nothing (without claiming that he knows this to be so). This is clearly not self-contradictory: what he has asserted may well be true, for it may be true that Would-be-Socrates knows nothing. It is not pragmatically self-refuting for him to assert this either: the fact that he makes the claim does not entail that he knows something. However, if asserting something commits the asserter to knowledge of what he has asserted, then Would-be-Socrates’ second assertion *commits him* to the falsity of what he has asserted, and it is in this sense “con conversationally self-refuting.” While what he has asserted may be true, given that assertion requires knowledge (as we are supposing), the truth of the assertion would show that he can be criticized for asserting something he does not know. Similarly, suppose that the assertion commits the asserter to believing (rather than knowing) what he or she has asserted. Then it is conversationally self-refuting to assert that one believes nothing.

The difference is again significant. When someone makes a pragmatically self-refuting claim, we can conclude that what he or she has asserted is false, as in the case of someone shouting (S). However, we cannot conclude from the fact that a claim is conversationally self-refuting that the claim is false. Would-be-Socrates’ assertion that he knows nothing may well be true. But it cannot meet the knowledge requirement for assertion.

A fourth notion of self-refutation is bound up not specifically with the norms governing a particular speech act, but with certain dialectical norms, i.e. rules of engagement

in a debate. These rules say which sorts of conduct by the debating parties are permissible or required. Thus, an ancient debate was a kind of cross-examination (see Aristotle's *Topics* discussed in Smith 2009). The rules of debate defined the role of the questioner and the respondent: the respondent had to begin by putting forward a thesis, and the questioner would then ask questions to which the answerer was supposed to answer either "yes" or "no," though he could also reject the question for certain specified reasons. The aim for the questioner was ultimately to refute the respondent, by forcing him to concede a contradiction. Just as in other games there may be types of position that inevitably lead to defeat, given the rules of the game, there can also be theses that it is impossible for a respondent to defend in debate, given a certain set of rules of engagement.

We do not need to speculate about the exact rules of dialectic in ancient Greece, and the idea of dialectical self-refutation need not be restricted to the specific form of debate practiced then. Rather, to illustrate dialectical self-refutation let us just assume an eminently reasonable rule for any reasoned debate, namely the rule that says that in a debate each debating party must acknowledge the claims made by the other side, and not impute claims that the other side has never made. On this background, it would, for example, be dialectically self-refuting to put forward the thesis that *no one claims that there are flame-spitting dragons*. For the opponent need only go on to claim that there are flame-spitting dragons. The rule just mentioned requires that the proponent of the thesis now acknowledge that his or her opponent is claiming that there are flame-spitting dragons. But this contradicts the thesis. Thus a dialectically self-refuting thesis is a thesis that cannot be defended in a debate (given certain rules of debate and given an able debating opponent).

In section 8, I will assess whether relativism is self-refuting in any of these four ways: dialectically, conversationally, pragmatically, or contradictorily.

2. Defining Relativism about a Feature F

Before we can consider the question whether relativism is self-refuting in any of the four senses, we need clarity about what relativism is. I shall offer a definition that is meant to capture the core of what philosophers have had in mind when discussing relativism. I do not claim that it actually *does* capture their meaning – that would probably be a dialectically self-refuting claim in the sense just discussed. I am confident, however, that the position here defined as "relativism" is a position sufficiently interesting to be discussed with respect to charges of self-refutation.

One can be a relativist about one domain but not about another, so I will be defining "relativism" as a relative term. What I am trying to define is "relativism about domain D " for variable D . So what is it to be a relativist about a given domain?

The core commitment of any relativist seems to be a claim to the effect that something is relative to something. For example, that beauty is relative to an aesthetic standard, that moral value is relative to a moral code, or that truth is relative to a conceptual framework. Most people will have a vague idea of what such claims of relativity mean, but to what exactly do they commit their proponents? It turns out that it is not easy to explicate the characteristic relativity claims made by relativists.

Abstracting from concrete cases, the general idea seems to be that the possession of some feature depends on some factor. However, not just any type of dependence will qualify. We are not talking, for example, about causal dependence, as in the claim that the looks of a person depend on their genes and their lifestyle. Rather, the dependence in question seems to be similar to that claimed in the following examples:

- 1 Whether it is *12 noon* depends on (is relative to) a time zone.
- 2 Whether a car is *suitable* depends on (is relative to) a purpose for which it is to be used.
- 3 Whether a quantity of wine is *enough* depends on (is relative to) a purpose for which it is to be used.
- 4 Whether a type of action is *legally permitted* depends on (is relative to) a legal system.
- 5 Whether a person is of *average height* depends on (is relative to) a reference class.
- 6 Whether the palace is *to the left of* the cathedral depends on (is relative to) an orientation.

It seems clear that in all these cases, the dependence is not a causal one, and not in any straightforward way empirical either. Arguably, the dependence is conceptual. Perhaps it is conceptual in the sense that anyone fully competent with these concepts (12 noon, suitability, sufficiency, etc.) will know that they are relative in this way (more on this below). This is not so in cases of causal dependence: I can fully understand the concept of body-height without realizing that body-height causally depends on, for example, nutrition in childhood.

I will say that a feature is relative to a “parameter,” where the parameter (time zone, purpose, legal system, etc.) can be thought of as a range of possible “values” of that parameter. Thus the parameter *time zone* consists of the values Greenwich Mean Time, Central European Time, etc., the parameter *purposes for car suitability* consists of the values driving on a steep dirt track, driving on a well-maintained motorway, etc., the parameter *legal system* consists of the values the German Civil Code in 2009, the US legal system in 1956, etc. If a feature is relative to some parameter in this way, it will depend on a choice of one of the values of the parameter in question whether an object can be correctly said to possess the feature. For example, it will depend on a choice of time zone whether it is correct to say that it is now 12 noon, and it will depend on a choice of a purpose whether it is correct to say that a given car is suitable.

It is an indication that a feature is relative to a parameter in this way when the same object can correctly be judged to possess the feature, but can also be correctly judged to lack the feature. In that case, there is either some kind of incoherence, or the feature is relative to a parameter. In that latter case, the object possesses the feature relative to one value of the parameter, but lacks it relative to another. For example, the same quantity of wine can correctly be judged to be enough (for the purpose of accompanying a dinner for two), but it can also correctly be judged not to be enough (for the purpose of getting an entire rugby team drunk).

I mentioned earlier that the relativity in question is arguably of a conceptual kind, perhaps in the sense that awareness of the relativity is a requirement for full competence with the concepts in question. However, this is not obvious in all the cases. One might argue that full competence with the concept *12 noon* does not require awareness of the

relativity of times to time zones and that it is an empirical discovery that this is so. For one might argue that the concept of *noon* is just the concept of the time of day when the sun appears the highest in the sky, and it is an empirical discovery that the time it appears the highest will be different in different locations. This is indeed true of one concept of *noon*, perhaps the one we used before the current system of measuring time was established, and still use occasionally in an astronomical context. However, the concept *12 noon* that we ordinarily use (along with 3 pm, 10.30 am, etc.) is such that in many places the sun does not appear highest at 12 noon. The time of the sun's highest point will vary within a single time zone, but it is 12 noon at exactly the same time at all locations within a time zone. Thus, it seems to me that even though some users of the concept *12 noon* may not be aware of the relativity to time zone of time measurements, this means that these users are less than fully competent with the concept *12 noon*. The relativity to time zone is part of the definition of "12 noon" and ignorance of this fact means partial ignorance of the concept *12 noon*. Similarly, ignorance of the dependencies mentioned in (2)–(6) demonstrates less than full competence with the corresponding concepts.

Whether or not this is correct, any form of relativism makes a core claim of dependence that is similar to (1)–(6) in that it does not seem to be causal or empirical dependence. Thus, when a relativist about beauty claims that it is relative to an aesthetic standard whether something is beautiful, the idea is not that the aesthetic standard is somehow causally responsible for the beauty (if any) of that thing. Nor is it a straightforward empirical discovery that beauty depends on an aesthetic standard. While it may be an empirical discovery that it depends on the aesthetic standards employed by a person what they *judge* to be beautiful, the dependence relevant here is relativity of what *is* beautiful to an aesthetic standard (not dependence of what *is judged to be* beautiful).

So generally relativism about a feature *F* involves at least the claim that:

- (i) For some parameter *P*, it is relative to *P* whether a thing is *F*.

Even if we are satisfied that we now have a sufficiently good grasp of what is meant by claims of the form (i), some further clarifications are still needed. Suppose, for example that there is a parameter, namely aesthetic standards, to which it is relative whether a thing is beautiful. Does this entail that there is an object which is beautiful relative to one aesthetic standard and which is not beautiful relative to some other aesthetic standard? It does not follow, but the claim of relativity would seem unmotivated and redundant unless there was at least one case where different aesthetic standards yielded different verdicts as to beauty. Thus, if a relativism about beauty is to make sense, it will also involve the claim that there is at least one object which is beautiful relative to one aesthetic standard but not relative to another. Typically, then, a relativistic thesis of form (i) will be accompanied by a claim of form (ii):

- (ii) There is an object *o*, and there are values *p1* and *p2* (in *P*), such that *o* has *F* relative to *p1* and not relative to *p2*.

A further question is whether a relativist about beauty would want to say that *every* object will be beautiful relative to some aesthetic standard but not relative to another. In general terms:

- (iii) For all objects o , there are values p_1 and p_2 (in P), such that o has F relative to p_1 and not relative to p_2 .

It is not obvious that every relativist needs to commit herself to the relevant instance of (iii). Intuitively, there may well be things that are beautiful (or not beautiful) by every aesthetic standard. A lot will depend on how widely the range of values in the parameter *aesthetic standard* is construed. If the range is restricted in the right way, then some objects will not be beautiful relative to any aesthetic standard in the range, and some objects will be beautiful relative to every aesthetic standard. Similarly, there might be an action that is legally permitted relative to all legal systems (or relative to none). In the case of example (1) it is clear that there is no time at which it is 12 noon relative to all time zones. But there are times (for example now: it is 00:17 Central European Time) at which it is *not* 12 noon relative to any time zones. I shall come back to this question in the next section. For now, it is important to register that a claim of form (iii) need not be part of a relativism committed to claims of form (i) and (ii). To summarize: relativism about a feature F requires claims of the form (i) and (ii).

Now, the alert reader will notice that any of the claims made in (1)–(6) meet the necessary condition just outlined for “relativism about a feature”: relativism about the feature of it being 12 noon, relativism about the suitability of cars, etc. For all these claims are of the form (i) and support a corresponding claim of form (ii). But normally these claims are not thought of as forms of relativism. One conclusion to draw would be that while a pair of theses of form (i) and (ii) is a necessary component of relativism about a feature F , this is not yet sufficient. One might then go on to search for some missing condition which, together with (i) and (ii) is sufficient. However, I do not regard that as a promising project. The term “relativism” is indeed normally reserved for theses that are at least in some sense controversial or surprising or philosophically interesting, such as the following claims of relativism about beauty and about moral permissibility:

- (AR) It is relative to an aesthetic standard whether an object is beautiful.
 (MR) It is relative to a moral code whether an action is morally permitted.

What do (AR) and (MR) have that (1)–(6) lack? Presumably the difference has to do with the nature of the feature and parameter concerning which relativity is claimed. Relativity of some features to some parameters deserves the label “relativism,” because it is regarded as sufficiently philosophically interesting or controversial, while it isn’t of others. But it will be difficult to find any more tractable condition which, conjoined with (i) and (ii), will make for a sufficient condition for relativism. Fortunately it will not be essential for understanding self-refutation objections to settle on a generally accepted sufficient condition for relativism about a feature.

3. Relativism about Truth

Just as one might claim that a feature like beauty or legality is relative to some parameter, one might claim that *truth* is relative to some parameter. Relativism about truth

is often regarded as especially radical or problematic (see e.g. Meiland 1980; Swoyer 2008), so it will be useful to have a separate look at it.

Insofar as truth can be ascribed to *sentences*, i.e. repeatable types, it is uncontroversial and unspectacular that truth should be relative. For it is obvious that the same *sentence* can be used to say something true on one occasion and something false on another. For example, the sentence “Tomorrow is May Day” is true only one day every year, false on other days, and the sentence “I am hungry” is true only in the mouth of a hungry person, but not true otherwise. In any case, sentential truth seems to be a theoretical notion primarily used by semanticists, and is routinely treated as relative to a “context of use” (cf. Kaplan 1977).

However, semanticists also often operate with a further notion of truth: truth as a property of the *semantic content* expressed by a sentence on a particular occasion, a *proposition*. Our ordinary concept of truth seems to be assimilated more easily to that of propositional truth. For it is the objects or contents of speech and thought that we ordinarily call true, as, for example, when someone says “What she says is true,” “That’s true,” or “It is true that vipers are dangerous.” Propositions were postulated precisely to be entities that play the role of the objects of thought and speech: they are what people assert, believe, suppose, etc. (see Frege 1892, who introduced the notion of a “thought”).

Now, propositions are often defined to have absolute truth-values (see, e.g., Frege 1918). According to this definition, when I now say or think that I am hungry, and then say or think this again an hour later, I have asserted and thought two different propositions, propositions about different times. Similarly, if someone else said or thought that he or she is hungry, he or she would yet again be asserting or thinking a different proposition. This way of construing propositions is not universal, for there are those who envisage “tensed” propositions, i.e. propositions that vary in truth-value over time (Kaplan 1977; Recanati 2007), and those who envisage “*de se* propositions,” propositions whose truth-value is relative to an agent (Lewis 1979). These non-standard construals of propositions would allow us to say that when I now say or believe that I am hungry, and then say or think it again later, I assert or think the very same proposition, and that two different people who utter “I am hungry” express the same proposition. These views satisfy the necessary conditions for relativism about the feature *truth* set out above. However, the label “relativism about truth” is usually associated with different types of relativizations, such as the claim that whether a proposition is true is relative to a set of norms or standards (Recanati 2007 is an exception).

The main reason why relativism about truth deserves special attention, however, is that truth is conceptually connected to other features, and this creates also a conceptual connection between relativism about truth and relativism about other features. For any feature *F*, it is a conceptual truth that if it is true that a thing is *F*, then that thing is *F*. Thus, generally, claims of the form “it is true that *a* is *F*” entail the corresponding claim of the form “*a* is *F*.” The reverse entailment also seems to hold: that “*a* is *F*” seems to entail that “it is true that *a* is *F*.” In fact, not everyone accepts the reverse entailment, for not everyone accepts that attributing a feature always yields a truth-evaluable claim or judgment. But let us assume, for the moment, that the reverse entailment holds, i.e. that whenever some object has a feature *F*, it is also

true that it has that feature. I shall come back to positions that deny the reverse entailment in due course.

Given this assumption, we can express relativism about any feature in terms of relativism about truth. For example, the view that it is relative to a legal system whether an action type is illegal can be expressed as the view that it is relative to a legal system whether propositions of a certain type are true. The propositions in question are atomic propositions that predicate the feature of illegality of something. Similarly, the view that it is relative to an aesthetic standard whether an object is beautiful can be expressed as the view that the truth of propositions that predicate beauty of an object is relative to aesthetic standards.

Conversely (and independently of the assumption), the claim that truth is relative to some parameter entails that there is at least one feature whose possession is relative. For if it is relative to some parameter P whether a proposition is true, then (by (ii)), there must be a proposition that is true relative to some p_1 of P , and not true relative to some other p_2 of P . Take one such proposition. This proposition will involve the attribution of some feature to some thing or things, so that it must be relative to P whether that thing or things have that feature. (One might be tempted to object that the proposition in question might be purely general, i.e. not concern any particular thing. However, any general claim will generalize about some feature; e.g., it will be a claim to the effect that everything or something has or lacks some feature. If such a claim is true relative to some and not true relative to other values of the parameter in question, then there must be an object which has the feature relative to the first value and lacks it relative to the second, at least if we assume bivalence of truth relative to a value.)

Who would deny the reverse entailment, that generally “ a is F ” entails “it is true that a is F ”? Let me mention two such types of view, using the feature of beauty as an example.

First, expressivists about beauty (e.g., Ayer 1946) believe that the feature of beauty does not give rise to truth-evaluable claims at all. Thus, even though we make claims like the claim that Millais’s *Isabella* is beautiful, such claims and the corresponding judgments do not have truth-evaluable contents at all. So, an expressivist might accept that Millais’s *Isabella* is beautiful yet deny that it is *true* that the picture is beautiful. An expressivist about beauty might therefore accept relativism about beauty without accepting relativism about truth (see Field 1982 for an example of a relativistic view that falls short of relativism about truth).

Secondly, there are those who might be called “indexical relativists” (see, e.g., Wright 2001; Kölbel 2004) or “indexical contextualists” (see, e.g., MacFarlane 2009). An indexical relativist about beauty will say that it is relative to a parameter – e.g., aesthetic standards – whether a thing is beautiful. But this does not entail that the feature of truth is relative to aesthetic standards. For even though any claim or judgment to the effect that some object is beautiful does have a truth-evaluable proposition as its content, this content will vary from occasion to occasion and have absolute truth-values. If it is correct for you to judge that Millais’s *Isabella* is beautiful and not correct for me to judge that this picture is beautiful, then this shows that the proposition judged by you is different from the proposition judged by me. Another way to express this would be to say that the feature of beauty, expressed by the predicate “is beautiful,” is not a genuine one-place property which could form a singular proposition when

compounded with a particular. Rather, the predicate “is beautiful” has an implicit second argument place, and it expresses a two-place relation rather than a one-place property. Thus, indexical relativism about the feature of beauty does not translate into relativism about propositional truth. (I have been speaking very widely of “features” rather than of “properties” precisely in order to leave room for expressivism and indexical relativism.)

Consequently, it is consistent to be a relativist about a non-truth-apt feature, yet deny relativism about truth. However, the moment that we claim that some truth-apt feature is relative to some parameter, we are thereby also committed to relativism about truth. Take again the example of beauty. If claims about beauty are truth-apt, then, if it is relative to an aesthetic standard whether an object is beautiful, it must also be relative to an aesthetic standard whether it is true that an object is beautiful. For generally, it is correct to judge that it is true that p if and only if it is correct to judge that p , at least in the range of p that is evaluable in terms of truth.

To summarize: if truth is subject to the equivalence schema – i.e., that it is true that p if and only if p – then relativism about any feature entails relativism about truth, and relativism about truth entails relativism about some feature. If the equivalence schema only holds in one direction – i.e. that if it is true that p , then p (but not vice versa) – then relativism about truth still entails relativism about *some* features, and relativism about any truth-apt feature still entails relativism about truth.

4. Defining Global Relativism

Self-refutation objections are often directed in particular against *global* forms of relativism. Global relativism, intuitively, is the thesis that everything is relative. But what could this mean in the terminology we have developed until now?

So far, we have been characterizing relativism about a single feature F . One could claim relativity to a parameter not just for a single feature, but for a whole range of features. Thus, one might say globally for all morally evaluative features that they are relative to some parameter, such as a moral code. Moral features might include features such as being morally good, being what ought to be done, etc.

We can expand the globality of this claim further by claiming that *every* feature is relative to some parameter. If we call the set of all features “ \mathbf{F} ,” then we would be claiming the following:

(GR1) For all $F \in \mathbf{F}$, there is a parameter P to which it is relative whether an object is F .

Anyone wishing to put forward a thesis like (GR1) ought to restrict carefully what is to count as a member of \mathbf{F} . If (GR1) entails relativism about F for every $F \in \mathbf{F}$, then each of these claims will be motivated only if there is an object which has F relative to some values of the parameter in question and lacks F relative to others (see (ii) above). But some potential features might be either contradictory or logically true of everything. Thus, if we allow features such as that of *being beautiful and not beautiful* or the of *being identical to oneself*, we will end up with some values of a relevant parameter relative to

which there is an object that is beautiful and not beautiful, or an object which is not identical to itself. It would be hard to see why these contradictory values of the parameter should be relevant or interesting for the correctness of any judgment as to whether an object has a feature or not. Radical theorists might want to make a case for this, but as long as such a radical theorist accepts that there are some features that cannot be attributed or cannot be denied of an object on logical grounds, they will have to preclude these features from membership in \mathbf{F} .

One way to restrict \mathbf{F} , which nevertheless leaves us with a relativism that is in some sense fully global, is to say that only logically simple features are members of \mathbf{F} . For arguably, no logically primitive feature is contradictory or logically true of everything. In the above examples, the problem was caused by allowing compound features, such as the feature of being beautiful and not beautiful, which is contradictory because of its compositional structure.

A special case of (GR1) would be the case where there is only one parameter to which all features are relative, such as, perhaps, a perspective, or a conceptual scheme. This results from changing the scopes of the quantifiers:

(GR2) There is a parameter P , such that for all $F \in \mathbf{F}$, it is relative to P whether an object is F .

I mentioned in section 2 that it is not necessarily part of relativism about some feature F to some parameter P that for every object x there are values $v1$ and $v2$ of P such that x is F relative to $v1$ and not F relative to $v2$ (I labeled this additional claim “(iii)”). Now, (GR1) could be strengthened by adding this claim:

(GR) For all $F \in \mathbf{F}$, there is a parameter P to which it is relative whether an object is F , and for all x there are values $v1$ and $v2$ of P , such that x is F relative to $v1$ and x is not F relative to $v2$.

(GR) is probably closer to what people have in mind when they speak of “global relativism” than (GR1). For (GR1) is consistent with there being very little variation in what features a given object possesses. In fact, it is consistent with there being just one object for each feature, with respect to which possession of the feature varies with the parameter. (GR), on the other hand, is fully global in the sense that whatever object o and feature F you pick: whether o is F will vary with the parameter. It is worth noticing that the restriction of membership in \mathbf{F} proposed for (GR1) may not be sufficient in the case of (GR). For one logically simple feature is that of truth. According to (GR), then, any logically contradictory or logically true proposition p is true relative to some and not true relative to other values of the parameter. If it is a constraint on the values of the parameter in question that whenever it is true that p relative to a value then p relative to that value, then we end up with values relative to which p and values relative to which not- p , even for contradictory or logically true propositions p . If this is to be avoided, then \mathbf{F} needs to be further restricted, i.e. the degree of globality of (GR) further curtailed.

As we saw above, on the assumption of truth-aptness, we can express any thesis as to the relativity of a feature to a parameter in terms of the relativity of truth of

corresponding propositions. We might say that it is relative to a parameter whether propositions that attribute a feature F to an object are true. Expressed in terms of the relativity of propositional truth, (GR1) would read:

(GR1*) For all $F \in \mathbf{F}$, there is a parameter P to which it is relative whether a proposition to the effect that an object is F is true.

If we simply said this:

(RP) It is relative to some parameter whether a proposition is true.

the claim would be much weaker than (GR1*) or (GR1). For (RP) only requires that at least one proposition be true relative to one and not true relative to another value of the parameter, while (GR1*) requires that for each feature there be a proposition that attributes it and which is true relative to one and not true relative to another value of the parameter. Thus (RP) would follow from any local relativism about a feature that gives rise to truth-evaluable propositions. It is not, therefore, particularly deserving of the label “global relativism.”

If we wanted to articulate a relativism about propositional truth that has a better claim to be called “global,” we should consider combining (RP) with the relevant instance of (iii) considered above. Thus, a global relativist about propositional truth might be someone who claims not only (RP), but who claims in addition that for every proposition there is a value of the parameter relative to which it is true and there is a value of the parameter relative to which it is not true:

(GRP) There is a parameter P , such that it is relative to P whether a proposition is true, and for every proposition $p \in P$, there is a value v_1 of P and a value v_2 of P , such that p is true relative to v_1 and not true relative to v_2 .

To understand (GRP), it may be useful to compare it to a view about propositional contents that is utterly familiar from semantics. In intensional semantics, there is an auxiliary notion of propositional truth – call it “truth_A” – which satisfies (RP): it is relative to a possible world whether a proposition is true_A. Truth in the ordinary sense is defined in terms of the auxiliary notion, namely as truth_A at the actual world, and is absolute. However, it is instructive to consider what (GRP) would mean if the parameter P in question was construed to be that of possible worlds, and “true” as expressing the auxiliary notion. In that case, (GRP) would amount to the claim that every proposition is contingent, or equivalently, that there are neither necessary truths nor necessary falsehoods.

We can compare relativism about propositional truth, and specifically global relativism about propositional truth to standard intensional semantics. In standard intensional semantics, propositional truth_A is relative to possible worlds, and truth proper is then defined as truth_A at the actual world. The relativist about propositional truth will also operate with a relative notion of propositional truth; however, she will not regard this notion as merely auxiliary, and she will not privilege one of the values of the parameter in question as absolutely privileged. Let’s call the relativist’s parameter

“perspectives.” We can say, then, that it is relative to a perspective whether a proposition is true (thus satisfying (RP)). (GRP) would then be the claim that for each proposition there is a perspective relative to which it is true, and a perspective relative to which it is not true. Equivalently, there are no propositions that are true, or not true, relative to every perspective.

Global relativism in the sense of (GRP) is clearly a radical claim. If we let it range unrestrictedly over all propositions, and there are contradictory as well as logically true propositions, then it follows from (GRP) that some perspectives evaluate contradictory propositions as true, and some will evaluate logically true propositions as not true. As above in (GR1), one response to this would be to restrict the range of propositions to logically simple propositions, i.e., propositions that are construable from an n -place relation and n objects. Another response is to allow perspectives that are contradictory. We shall soon consider the coherence of such a position.

These considerations leave us with various global forms of relativism worth considering: (GR1) and (GR) with and without restriction on membership in \mathbf{F} , and (GRP) with and without restriction on the membership in \mathbf{P} .

5. Difficulties with Unrestricted Global Relativism

I have already pointed out that global relativism concerning all features (GR1) and global relativism concerning propositional truth (GRP) face special problems if the generalization is unrestrictedly over all features or all propositions. Suppose that the features in \mathbf{F} include the feature of being a bachelor and being married, and that \mathbf{P} contains the proposition that Geray is a bachelor and Geray is married. Let us say that the values of the parameter in question are called “perspectives.” The proponent of (GR1) is then committed to the existence of an object that is a bachelor and is married relative to some perspective. The proponent of (GRP) is then committed to it being true relative to some perspective that Geray is a bachelor and Geray is married.

One problem with this sort of view is that it becomes unclear how we are to construe the feature of being a bachelor (cf. Bennigson 1999: 214–15). It would seem that one of the distinctive marks of the feature of bachelorhood is that nothing is both a bachelor and married. But there are perspectives in which some things are both bachelors and married, so it is not clear in what sense this is a mark of bachelorhood. Someone might say that there is a certain subset of perspectives, call them the “reasonable perspectives,” and that nothing is both a bachelor and married relative to any reasonable perspective. However, in that case the relativist would be privileging one set of perspectives over others – it would be the reasonable perspectives which determine the identity of features. Similarly, it would seem that what is distinctive about the proposition that Geray is a bachelor is that this proposition is in some sense incompatible with the proposition that Geray is married. But in what sense? There are perspectives relative to which both are true. Again, privileging some perspectives to explain the sense of incompatibility goes against the basic commitments of the relativist. It will not help either to insist that at least among the reasonable perspectives none is privileged. For with respect to the parameter *reasonable perspectives*, (GR1) no longer holds.

A similar point can be made concerning contradictory and logically true features or propositions, as discussed above. If F and P contain these, then it remains unclear how the relevant logical notions are individuated.

Now some, like Quine, may deny that features (or concepts) and propositions can be individuated in terms of essential or analytic marks at all (e.g. Quine 1951). However, such people also typically refuse to theorize in terms of concepts or propositions altogether and would thus have to disagree with the global relativist at an earlier stage. I will leave it to the reader to investigate whether and how Quine could articulate a coherent global relativism about sentential truth.

6. Difficulties with Global Indexical Relativism

As we saw, indexical relativism about some feature F is a form of relativism that does not transfer to the propositional level. Thus, while the moral indexical relativist (like Harman 1975) will claim that it is relative to a moral code whether anyone ought to perform any action, she will maintain that no complete proposition is fully expressed by saying that someone ought to do something. For the two-place feature *ought* is not a genuine two-place relation. All there is is a three-place relation that relates an agent, an action (or action type), and a moral code. Thus there are genuine propositions to the effect that someone ought to do something relative to a moral code, and propositions of this sort are the propositional content of claims and judgments incompletely described as claims or judgments to the effect that someone ought to do something; however, once we have identified the complete propositional content of such claims or judgments, these have absolute truth-values.

Now, global relativism about features, as expressed by (GR) or (GR1), cannot easily take the form of indexical relativism (see Kölbel 2002; Boghossian 2006; MacFarlane forthcoming). For consider someone saying “Millais’s *Isabella* is beautiful,” thereby claiming that Millais’s *Isabella* is beautiful. The indexical relativist about beauty will claim that the feature of beauty is relative, and that therefore the proposition expressed by the utterance and the genuine propositional content of the claim is for some aesthetic standard $v1$, the proposition that Millais’s *Isabella* is beautiful relative to $v1$. This proposition will involve the dyadic relation of $x1$ being beautiful relative to $x2$. Now, if this indexical relativist is going to go global and accept (GR), he will have to say that the feature of being beautiful relative to (some particular) value $v1$ also suffers from relativity. Thus the proposition expressed by the utterance, the propositional content of the claim, cannot be the proposition that Millais’s *Isabella* is beautiful relative to a , for the indexical relativist holds that propositional truth is absolute and the relativity of beauty relative to $v1$ therefore precludes there being such a proposition. The proposition expressed will be the proposition that Millais’s *Isabella* is beautiful relative to $v1$ relative to $v2$, for some $v2$ that is the relevant value of the parameter. However, the feature of beauty relative to $v1$ relative to $v2$ is again a feature to which (GR) can be applied. So once again we have not identified the propositional content of the utterance and the claim. It is a consequence of this view that we cannot identify a proposition that is the content of the utterance, for any proposal will trigger another round of

application of (GR). Another way of putting the point is this: according to any indexical relativist about some feature F , the predicate expressing F has an implicit additional argument place which is contextually bound. But whenever we propose a number n of hidden argument places, (GR) will force us to say that the predicate expressing F actually had $n + 1$ argument places. Thus an indexical relativist with global pretensions seems to be forced to say that no claim expresses a specifiable proposition and that every predicate expresses on any occasion a relation of infinite adicity.

This difficulty arises specifically for *indexical* relativists with *global* pretensions. Global relativists who are not indexical relativists or indexical relativists who don't go global will not have this problem.

7. Applying Global Relativism to Itself

Let us now turn to self-refutation problems more properly so-called. It has often been thought that global forms of relativism can be turned against themselves applying principles such as (GR) or (GRP) to themselves (see, e.g., Meiland 1980; Preston 1992; Hales 1997; Moser et al. 1998).

The first move in self-refutation objections against global relativism is to apply the thesis of global relativism to itself. Both (GR) and (GRP) can be applied to themselves. Thus, if the proposition expressed by (GRP) is a member of \mathbf{P} then one instance of (GRP) would be:

(GRP_{GRP}) There is a parameter P , such that it is relative to P whether a proposition is true, and there are values $v1$ and $v2$ of P , such that (GRP) is true relative to $v1$ and not true relative to $v2$.

If membership of \mathbf{P} is restricted to logically simple propositions, then (GRP_{GRP}) does not follow from (GRP). Thus, the usual first move in self-refutation objections cannot be straightforwardly made with the sanitized restricted version of (GRP). What about applying (GR) to itself? This can be done as long as truth is admitted as a feature in \mathbf{F} , by first instantiating for truth:

(GR_{truth}) There is a parameter P to which it is relative whether an object is true, and for all x there are values $v1$ and $v2$ of P , such that x is true relative to $v1$ and x is not true relative to $v2$.

and then instantiating for (GR):

(GR_{GR}) There is a parameter P to which it is relative whether an object is true, and there are values $v1$ and $v2$ of P , such that (GR) is true relative to $v1$ and (GR) is not true relative to $v2$.

Again, (GR_{GR}) follows from (GR) only if truth is included in \mathbf{F} . We noted earlier that (GR) faces independent problems if truth is included in \mathbf{F} . (GR1) did not face these

problems, so it will be interesting to whether an application of (GR1) to itself can serve as the basis of a self-refutation argument. Again, we can instantiate for truth:

(GR1_{truth}) There is a parameter P to which it is relative whether an object is true.

We could now make specific reference to (GR1), as in:

(GR1_{GR1}) There is a parameter P to which it is relative whether (GR1) is true.

However, it does not follow from (GR1_{truth}) or (GR1_{GR1}) that (GR1) is true relative to some and not true relative to other values of P .

Thus, (GRP_{GRP}), (GR_{GR}) and (GR1_{GR1}) are potential starting points for a self-refutation objection. A proponent of (GRP) can only be saddled with (GRP_{GRP}) if she defends the unrestricted version of (GRP), a proponent of (GR) is only committed to (GR_{GR}) insofar as she defends a version of (GR) that allows truth to be a feature contained in \mathbf{F} . But we already saw reasons independent of any self-refutation objection against these unrestricted versions of (GRP) and (GR). However, it will still be worth examining the effectiveness of self-refutation objections against those who nevertheless defend the fully global, unrestricted versions of (GRP) and (GR), as well as their effectiveness against (GR1).

8. Self-Refutation Again

J. L. Mackie suggests that global relativism is self-refuting in the strong sense of being self-contradictory. He starts with the claim that the operator “it is absolutely true that” is “strictly prefixable” (Mackie 1964: 200) – i.e., any claim that p entails the claim that it is absolutely true that p . If it is absolutely true that p , then it is not the case that p is true relative to some values of a parameter, but p is not true relative to other values of that parameter. Now, if anyone makes a global relativist claim, such as (GR) or (GRP), then their claim entails that what they have claimed is absolutely true, which in turn entails that it is not the case that what they have claimed is true relative to some but not other values of some parameter. But this contradicts (GR_{GR}) and (GRP_{GRP}). For they claim precisely that (GR) and (GRP) respectively are true relative to some and not true relative to other values of some parameter.

This objection cannot be used at all against (GR1), for (GR1_{GR1}) is compatible with the claim that (GR1) is absolutely true, i.e. true relative to all values of the parameter in question. Does it carry any weight against the unrestricted proponents of (GR) and (GRP)? It seems to me that the global relativist has an easy answer: she only needs to deny that the operator “it is absolutely true that” is strictly prefixable. The most obvious motivation for this inference rule would seem to be the view that all truth is absolute truth. But the global relativist is defending the opposite view, so would not need to accept this motivation. The objection, therefore, begs the question against the global relativist. As a matter of fact, any *local* relativist will also reject Mackie’s inference rule.

There are also some more recent similar attempts to show that global relativism is inconsistent by providing a rigorous semantics for the global relativist’s claim. Let me

briefly mention two such attempts. Hales (1997) introduces a formal language in which sentences are evaluated with respect not only to possible worlds but also to perspectives. The language contains two sentential operators, “REL” and “ABS,” which are supposed to model the phrases “it is relatively true that” and “it is absolutely true that.” The semantics for these operators is closely analogous to that of diamond and box in standard S5 modal logic, thus roughly, a formula “REL(p)” (“ABS(p)”) is true at a world and perspective just if p is true at that world and some (every) perspective is “commensurable with” that first perspective. The global relativist’s “everything is relative” is then modeled as:

(GRH) For all p : REL(p)

Now, (GRH) can be applied to the claim that (GRH) is absolutely false:

(GRH_{ABS(¬GRH)}) REL(ABS(¬GRH))

But the semantics for the two operators is analogous with S5 modal logic, which means that the commensurability relation is transitive, which in turn means that REL(ABS(p)) entails ABS(p). Thus, if (GRH) is true at a world and perspective, then its negation is also true and even absolutely true at that world and perspective (this argument has some similarity with an informal argument in Burnyeat 1976b: 183).

An immediate concern with this argument is that construing the quantification in (GRH) as allowing unrestricted instantiation by any proposition will raise the sorts of worries discussed above in sections 3 and 4. Independently of this, several philosophers have criticized Hales’s construal of the commensurability relation as transitive, in analogy with S5 (Shogenji 1997; Kölbel 1999; Ressler 2009). Given that the notion of commensurability is not in any way anchored independently, the only role it has in the semantics is that of theoretically underpinning certain inferential properties of REL and ABS. Thus, there is no reason to construe it as transitive.

Ressler (2009) proposes a different semantics for an operator REL with which he attempts to model the global relativist’s claim. On his semantics, REL is analogous not to “possibly” in modal logic, but to “contingently”: “REL(p)” is true at a world and perspective just if p is true at some perspective “accessible from” that first perspective and p is not true at some perspective accessible from that first perspective. Interpreted in this way, (GRH) is very similar to (GRP) above. Moreover, on this construal, unlike Hales’s, relative truth is incompatible with absolute truth. Ressler argues that, on his construal, there is a model in which REL(p) is true at some perspective, and that therefore global relativism is consistent. However, Ressler also argues that if we are to introduce an operator that allows us to speak explicitly and transparently about what is true at which perspective (“FOR”), then saving the consistency of global relativism requires some fairly radical maneuvers.

As with every philosophical claim, rigorous semantic modeling of the global relativist’s claim has the advantage of providing definite results concerning the consistency of the thesis when construed in a certain way in a formal language with certain traits. However, it remains difficult to interpret these results insofar as there is controversy about the best way to construe the global relativist claim.

Let us return to global relativism as defined in section 7. Can the unrestricted global relativist's commitment to (GR_{GR}) and (GRP_{GRP}) be used to show that her claim is pragmatically self-refuting? As explained above, a pragmatically self-refuting claim is a claim that falsifies itself, even if *what* it claims may be consistent, as for example someone's claim that she is not claiming anything. There seems to be no reason to think that global relativism is self-refuting in this sense.

The third variety of self-refutation introduced above was conversational self-refutation. A claim or assertion is conversationally self-refuting if the content of the claim is incompatible with the claim's compliance with certain conversational norms governing the making of claims/assertions. An example would be an assertion that one does not believe anything, which, if true, does not meet the requirement that one should only assert what one believes. Along those lines, it might be claimed that making assertions or claims is subject to the norm that one should only assert or claim what is absolutely true, or what one believes to be absolutely true. Compliance with this requirement is indeed in conflict with the content of the unrestricted global relativists' claim. For what they claim entails (GR_{GR}) or (GRP_{GRP}) respectively, i.e. that what they have claimed is not true absolutely.

The relativist can respond in one of two ways. First, she can concede that assertions and claims are subject to this norm, but in this case she will have to admit that she is violating it. In fact, she would be committed to saying that anyone asserting anything at all is violating the norm, and that in this sense no one should assert anything. Thus we would have a successful self-refutation of sorts: the global relativist cannot put forward her position without by her own lights falling foul of the norms of conversation she herself accepts. However, the global relativist will point out that no one asserting anything ever complies with that norm.

Secondly, the relativist might deny that making assertions and claims is subject to this norm. She might insist that there are certain norms of assertion that she accepts, but that asserting only what is (or what one believes to be) absolutely true is not among those norms. Thus the self-refutation objection fails against this relativist.

At this point, the objector might attempt to put further pressure on the relativist by challenging her to explain to which norms, according to her, assertions *are* subject. Indeed, it is often thought that relativists in general (local and global) need to meet this challenge (see, e.g., Evans 1985; MacFarlane 2005). The relativist cannot say that there is a value (or values) of the parameter relative to which what one asserts ought to be true. For in that case, that value or values would seem to be privileged, and the question would arise whether the absolute notion of truth relative to that value (or values) wouldn't have sufficed. But the relativist might offer some other norm in terms of relative truth. For example, he might say for each assertion there is a value of the parameter relative to which the asserted proposition ought to be true, but not the same value for each assertion. An alternative line the relativist might pursue is to say that assertion is governed by the norm that one ought to assert only what one believes.

There clearly are further important questions to answer for the global or local relativist in this area, such as what the point of asserting is, and to what norms belief is subject. However, this is not the place to pursue these issues (for further discussion, see, e.g., Kölbel 2001: chs 6 and 7; MacFarlane 2005; Kölbel forthcoming). As far as a charge of conversational self-refutation goes, we have to conclude that global relativists

can reject the alleged norms of assertion the violation of which their claim entails. But even if they don't reject it, their position may be an overall coherent one.

A charge of dialectical self-refutation against Protagoras seems to be what is under discussion at one point in Plato's *Theaetetus*. The thesis by Protagoras under discussion at that point is that "things are for every man what they seem to him to be" (170a), a thesis that is sometimes called "subjectivism." At 171b Socrates asks: "In conceding the truth of the opinion of those who think him wrong, he is really admitting the falsity of his own thesis," to which Theodorus agrees. Here the idea seems to be that since Protagoras is obliged, by the rules of dialectic, to acknowledge that his opponents claim that subjectivism is false (i.e., that it is not the case that whatever anyone believes is true for him or her), he cannot avoid the conclusion that subjectivism is true for his opponents. Now, in fact Socrates drops the qualifier "for his opponents" at this point, and it is a subject of interpretative puzzlement why he does so. However, one dialectical point holds with or without the qualifier: Protagoras cannot avoid conceding that what his opponents say is true for them.

The point, however, seems to depend on subjectivism's special additional claim, namely that whatever anyone believes is true for him or her. Global relativism, as discussed here, does not involve such a claim. Some questions concerning the dialectical status of global relativism remain nevertheless. Given that the global relativist claims that every proposition is true relative to some and not true relative to other values of the parameter, and that none of the values is in any way privileged, questions remain as to how the global relativist could be dialectically successful. For whatever she claims, the opponent will always be able to point out that that claim is false relative to some values of the parameter, and that these values are no worse than those relative to which it is true. This brings us back to the challenge articulated above: the global relativist will have to explain what normative constraints there are on beliefs and claims. For otherwise the point of debate or of communication and thought generally remains obscure.

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