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TRUTH OF TASTE: THE DEPTH OF RELATIVISM

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TRUTH OF TASTE: THE DEPTH OF RELATIVISM¹

Abstract

Three relativistic semantic theories were suggested for the statements of taste: *indexicalism*², *propositional relativism* and *factual relativism*. Comparing and contrasting these possible solutions, I invoke three problems Max Kolbel formulates and focus on the problem of disagreement. I challenge Iris Einheuser's theory and claim that while indexical approach underestimates the problem of disagreement, factual relativism overestimates it. Propositional relativism appears to provide the most sensible explanation of the phenomenon.

JEL classification: Z

Keywords: relativism, truth, taste, semantics, indexicalism, contextualism, propositional relativism, factual relativism

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²This view is also often called contextualism.

Introduction

I relish the sweet taste of fresh strawberries and hold that strawberries taste good, so I will express this belief by asserting an indicative sentence: “Strawberries taste good.” However, Heidi finds the taste too unsubtle and expresses her taste preference by sincerely asserting the sentence: “Strawberries do not taste good.” On the one hand, it is tempting to think that our disagreement here is blameless. Heidi judges from her point of view, from her standard of taste, while I evaluate this statement using my own aesthetic standard. On the other hand, one might pay attention to the fact that I cannot truthfully assert the sentence that Heidi asserts without changing my opinion. This suggests that there is a genuine disagreement between us.

There are several strategies that could be pursued in providing a semantics for statements of taste. In the standard semantics propositions or propositional (semantic) contents play a central role³. Traditionally, a proposition – the object of beliefs and assertions – has a truth value only relative to a possible world, a way the world could be. In this paper I discuss three theories that presuppose that statements of taste do express propositions: indexicalism, propositional relativism and factual relativism. *Indexicalism* is the view that the same sentence expresses different standard propositions in different contexts. In this paper I focus on the most familiar version of indexicalism that has it that the proposition expressed by “Strawberries taste good” is equivalent to the proposition expressed by “On my standard, strawberries taste good,” as it provides motivations for propositional relativism. *Propositional relativism* is the view that taste propositions vary in their truth-value with some parameter (‘a standard of taste’ or ‘a perspective’) additional to the possible world parameter⁴. *Factual Relativism* is the view that the relevant facts vary across contexts of assessment⁵.

In the first introductory section I lay out the indexical approach and two forms of propositional relativism, and point out the main difference between these views. In the second section I consider motivations for propositional relativism and go into three problems for indexicalists that Max Kölbel formulates. I argue that the third problem,

³By ‘the standard semantic’ I mean the framework having its origin in Frege’s work.

⁴[Kölbel, 2008, p.4]

⁵[Einheuser, 2008, p.188]

the problem of disagreement is the most serious. Finally, in the last section, I challenge the solution that Iris Einheuser’s factual relativism provides and discuss our ontological intuitions in the case of statements of taste. I claim that if indexicalism underestimates disagreement between Heidi and me, factual relativism overestimates it.

1 Indexical Approach and Two Forms of Propositional Relativism

According to the standard indexical approach, the proposition I have managed to express by asserting “Strawberries taste good” is the same as the proposition expressed by the phrase “On my standard of taste, strawberries taste good” and has the same truth value in every context of use. This explains why there is no contradiction between what I say and what Heidi says. We are just talking past one another. I express something about how things are according to my standard and Heidi expresses something about how things are according to her standard. Propositional relativists claim that the problem for this view is that it is not clear why Heidi disagrees with me. Nothing prevents Heidi from accepting my statement that on my standard, strawberries taste good. Nevertheless, in the example above she disagrees with me when I say “Strawberries taste good.” I consider this problem and indexicalists’ answer to this challenge in some detail later.

Let me now sketch the propositional relativists’ solution to the puzzle of faultless disagreement. In contrast with indexicalism, propositional relativism states that Heidi expresses the denial of the proposition I have expressed. However, the proposition about taste does not have its truth value relative only to possible worlds as it has in standard semantics, rather, its truth value is relative to the world of the context of use w and the standard of taste p . Thus truth value is relative to the complex circumstances of evaluation, the pair $\langle w, p \rangle$. There are two basic options about which standard of taste should be taken into consideration⁶: the assessor’s [MacFarlane, 2005], or the speaker’s

⁶Here I follow Kölbel’s definition of relativism. What he calls relativism, I call propositional relativism. On MacFarlane’s initial view, only one option – the standard of taste of the assessor – is available for a propositional relativist.

[Kölbel, 2008]⁷.

For MacFarlane [2005], the truth value of a proposition like ‘Strawberries taste good’ is relative to the world of the context of use and the standard of taste of the assessor at the context of assessment⁸. If one (Rachel, for example) assesses my statement to be true of my actual world w_I according to one’s standard of taste p_r , one must consider Heidi’s statement to be false of her actual world w_h , according to one’s standard of taste p_r . This explains why Heidi disagrees with me when I assert “Strawberries taste good.” Heidi evaluates the proposition expressed by me as false of my actual world according to her standard of taste $\langle w_I, p_h \rangle$. I evaluate the proposition expressed by her as false of her actual world according to my standard of taste $\langle w_h, p_I \rangle$. At the same time, one can think that our disagreement is faultless because what I assert is true in my context of assessment and what she asserts is true in her context of assessment. On MacFarlane’s initial view, the truth value of the proposition ‘Strawberries taste good’ is not relative only to possible worlds as it is in standard semantics, but also depends on the standard of taste of the assessor⁹.

According to Kölbel’s version of propositional relativism, what I express by asserting the sentence “Strawberries taste good” is the denial of the proposition Heidi expresses by asserting “Strawberries do not taste good.” However, a truth value of the proposition expressed is relative to the standard of the speaker. Thus, when I assert “Strawberries taste good,” I assert something true in my context of use, and when Heidi asserts “Strawberries do not taste good,” she asserts something true in her context of use. This explains why both Heidi and I are faultless. This also explains why Heidi can’t assert my sentence and I can’t assert hers. The proposition that strawberries taste good is false in Heidi’s context and the proposition that strawberries do not taste good is false in mine. According to Kölbel, the truth value of the proposition ‘Strawberries taste good’ is not relative only to possible worlds, but depends on the standard of taste of the speaker as well.

⁷There are also more sophisticated views like MacFarlane’s later semisolipsistic relativism that takes both the context of use and the context of assessment to be relevant. See [MacFarlane, 2008].

⁸By ‘context of assessment’ MacFarlane means a concrete situation in which use of the sentence is being assessed [MacFarlane, 2005, p.325].

⁹I introduce some notations, like $\langle w_I, p_h \rangle$, here to compare this view with factual relativism in the last section.

In my opinion, the difficulty with Kölbel's view is similar to the problem for indexicalists. It is not clear why Heidi disagrees with me in the conversation above. If the proposition expressed by me should always be evaluated with respect to my standard of taste, everybody must recognize my authority. Heidi does not argue with me because she thinks that she knows what tastes good on my standard of taste better than I do. Rather, it seems much more plausible that she judges according to her own standard. Kölbel may reply that Heidi does not actually disagree with me in the case above. She doesn't evaluate my sentence; rather, she makes her own assertion. I don't think this is a fair answer. It seems that Kölbel's model does not provide sufficient apparatus for cross-perspective evaluation of sentences, which is crucial for communication. When we talk, we are not just asserting sentences, but also listening to and understanding what other people say. We evaluate each other's assertions. Dispute about taste is not any different in this respect from other disputes.

It is worth noticing that the problem with Kölbel's account is similar to the problem with indexicalists' account, but not the same. For Kölbel, what Heidi expresses in her sentence is the denial of the proposition I express. In this sense, we are not talking past one another as we are for indexicalists.

According to Kölbel, though the truth value of the proposition is not absolute, the truth value of the utterance is absolute¹⁰. The context of use determines both the proposition expressed by an utterance and that proposition's truth value. What makes this view relativistic in Kölbel's terminology is that the truth value of a proposition varies depending not only on the possible world parameter, but also on some additional parameter, in our case on the standard of taste of the speaker. However, according to MacFarlane, truth of neither the proposition nor the utterance is absolute. The proposition a sentence expresses is determined by the context of use, but the truth of the proposition expressed is determined by the context of assessment. The sentence "Strawberries taste good" expresses the proposition that strawberries taste good in every context of use, but the truth of this proposition depends on the world of the context of use and the assessor's standard at the context of assessment.

¹⁰'Absolute' should be read 'relative only to possible worlds', except the final section, in which 'absolute' is 'relative only to perspectival possible worlds'.

In the next section I step away from the dissimilarity of various propositional relativistic approaches. I focus on the general motivations Max Kölbel presents for relativism in the case of judgments of taste. Propositional relativism requires significant revision of the standard semantics. Where does an indexical approach go wrong?

2 Three Problems for Indexicalists

Kölbel mentions three problems for the indexical proposal. He thinks that the first concern is not serious, so he quickly (I would say too quickly) dismisses it. He then considers the last two problems in detail. In what follows I discuss each problem in turn: postulating implicit structure, (SR) principle, and disagreement.

2.1 The First Problem: Postulating Implicit Structure

The first problem, which Kölbel evaluates as fairly superficial, has to do with postulating the implicit syntactic structure. Propositional relativists might claim that nothing like “on my standard” is explicitly present in the sentence “Strawberries taste good” and should not be posited. For Kölbel, this problem is not deep because it is hard to venture an argument against implicit syntactic structure in general. To argue against it in this particular case one should show that there are good alternatives. Investigation of the alternatives will lead us back to relativism [Kölbel, 2008, p.12-13].

I think emphasizing this problem can be a perfectly good strategy for a propositional relativist. A propositional relativist should emphasize that nothing like “On my standard” is explicitly said in this sentence. An adherent of propositional relativism wants to argue that when I, a strawberry-lover, and Heidi, who doesn’t like strawberries are talking to each other and assert “Strawberries taste good,” we express the same propositional content. It is very intuitive to hold that, by asserting the same indicative sentence in the conversation, we express the same content, and by asserting p and $not - p$ we express the propositions one of which is the denial of the other. Otherwise, no dispute can be judged. A person must be responsible for what she utters, and her responsibility must be limited by what she actually utters. Consider the following conversation between Indexicalist Jonathan, who knows me and my tastes well, and I:

Me convinced by Heidi: Strawberries do not taste good!

Indexicalist Jonathan: You lie. On your standard, strawberries taste good!

Me: Please, do not misinterpret me. I am not saying “On my standard, strawberries do not taste good”. I am saying “Strawberries do not taste good.” It is a general fact about strawberries and has nothing to do with me and my standard. Personally, I like strawberries, they are so sweet! But I can’t trust my taste, everybody says that my taste is horrible. I know from a very reliable source, the most influential expert in taste, that strawberries do not taste good.

Indexicalist Jonathan: This is all confused, you can’t say it. When you say “Strawberries do not taste good”, there is the implicit structure in your sentence. By uttering “Strawberries do not taste good”, you utter “On my standard, strawberries do not taste good.”

Me: I don’t think, you are right. Nobody can call me a liar, if I assert what I sincerely believe in. I believe that strawberries do not taste good, and I assert it.

This example shows, I think, that the burden of proof is on indexicalists. They have to demonstrate that postulating implicit structure is necessary. Otherwise, we should not multiply unnecessary entities¹¹. Certainly, my considerations in this subsection are very schematic and don’t bring any final evidence to the question of the implicit structure. The point, I have tried to make here is that Kölbel is too quick to dismiss this concern as unsubstantial. I will keep returning to the question of the implicit structure and the surface grammar throughout the paper.

¹¹Jason Stanley boldly claims that “...all effects of extra-linguistic context on the truth conditions of the assertion are traceable to elements in the actual syntactic structure of the sentence uttered” [Stanley, 2000, p.391]. However, I am not sure how to apply his work to the present discussion. Stanley uses “a traditional syntax” involving variables. Though in some sense he argues against the implicit structure, he seems to advocate a view which is closer to indexical approach rather than propositional relativism. How exactly his arguments bear on the question at hand is a subject for future investigation.

2.2 The Second Problem: (SR) Principle

On Kölbel's view, the second problem for an indexicalist proposal is deeper. If the sentence "Strawberries taste good" expresses different propositions when pronounced by me and by Heidi, then we would expect speech-reports of such utterances to be sensitive to this difference. Kölbel formulates the following general principle that governs speech reporting:

(SR) If a sentence s is indexical in such a way that an utterance of s in context c_1 expresses a different proposition from an utterance of s in a context c_2 , then an utterance by someone A of s in c_1 cannot be correctly reported in c_2 by using the form of words ' a said that s ' (where " a " is some term referring to A) [Kölbel, 2008, p.13]

(SR) appears to be working in some paradigm cases of indexical elements like 'I', 'now', 'today', 'that'. For example, the sentence "Today is Monday" said by me today, should not be reported tomorrow by the sentence "Tonya said today is Monday." And if I point at a yellow spot and say: "That spot is yellow," one should not point at a different spot and report my sentence by the phrase "Tonya said that spot is yellow." However, the speech report by Heidi "Tonya said strawberries taste good" seems to be correct even though her standard of taste is different from mine.

Indexicalists' reply to this concern might be that not all indexical elements meet (SR). For example, "local" is context-sensitive without meeting (SR). If John says in Barcelona: "I met her in a local bar," then Ben's report in Digbeth: "John said he had met her in a local bar" will still be correct, even though his context is different from John's in the relevant respect.

Kölbel claims that this reply is not conclusive. Ben's report is a counterexample only if the context-sensitivity of "local" is such that it refers to different areas in the context of Ben's saying and in the context of John's saying. However, "local" does not always pick out the surroundings of the place of utterance, it picks out the surroundings of the place salient in the context of utterance. Thus, according to Kölbel, this does not work as a counterexample to (SR).

I also think that the example described above is not persuasive as a counterexample to (SR), but unlike Kölbel, I think that the example could be modified to serve

this purpose. Let me first explain why it doesn't work. (SR) concerns the same sentence with an indexical element which expresses different propositions in different contexts, but in the case above the sentence has more than one indexical element. In Kölbel's example the sentence John said is different from Ben's report: 'I in the original sentence is substituted by 'he' in the report, and present tense is changed to past tense. It makes checking whether "local" is a problematic case for (SR) more complicated than it should be. The presence of another indexical element in the sentence may affect the reference of "local"¹². If John says in Barcelona: "I met her in a local bar," "local" refers to Barcelona. So far, so good. But then we need to check that the same sentence refers to the different place when uttered by Ben in Digbeth. "I met her in a local bar" uttered by Ben will refer to Digbeth, but "John met her in a local bar" may still refer to Barcelona, and if it refers to Barcelona, then this sentence does not work as a counterexample to (SR). I think one should construct the case without additional indexical elements to clarify the issue.

Let me start with some preliminary remarks. If John says in Barcelona: "Red Hot Chili Peppers played in a local bar," and Ben's report in Digbeth is: "John said Red Hot Chili Peppers played in a local bar," then it is arguable whether this report is still correct. Ben's report is ambiguous: "local" may refer to Barcelona or to Digbeth. In the context of a previous conversation about what is going on in Barcelona it refers to a local bar in Barcelona, and in the context of a conversation about nightlife in Digbeth it refers to a local bar there. To be a counterexample to (SR) the sentence "Red Hot Chili Peppers played in a local bar" should refer to Barcelona if said by John and to Digbeth if said by Ben and, at the same time, embedded in the sentence by Ben such as "John said that Red Hot Chili Peppers played in a local bar," it should refer to Barcelona.

I agree with Kölbel to the point that in both Ben's sentences "local" refers to the location most salient in the context of conversation, but I think the case might be constructed so that it still works as a counterexample to (SR). The words "John said" might make John's location the most salient. Let's consider the following example. Kathy and Ben are talking in Digbeth. Kathy has just returned from traveling and asks Ben for the latest news. Ben says: "Have you heard that John is in Barcelona? He likes it there..."

¹²One hypothesis can be that in the presence of a classical indexical such as "he", "local" often refers to the location of the referent of another indexical.

Oh, yeah. Red Hot Chili Peppers played in a local bar.” In this context “local” seems to refer to Digbeth. However, if in the same situation Ben says: “Have you heard that John is in Barcelona? He likes it there... Oh, yeah. John said Red Hot Chili Peppers played in a local bar,” “local” would refer to Barcelona.

It is easy to see that the given above example is a counterexample to (SR). Let the sentence “Red Hot Chili Peppers played in a local bar” be s and c_1 be the context of John in Barcelona and c_2 the context of Ben in Digbeth described above. Then s is indexical in such a way that an utterance of s in context c_1 expresses a different proposition from an utterance of s in context c_2 . An utterance of “Red Hot Chili Peppers played in a local bar” by John in Barcelona refers to Barcelona and an utterance of “Red Hot Chili Peppers played in a local bar” by Ben in Digbeth refers to Digbeth. However, an utterance of s in c_1 (by John in Barcelona) can be correctly reported in c_2 (by Ben in Digbeth) using the form of words ‘John said that s ’.

Though Kölbel thinks that the example with “local” does not work, he also argues that this objection to the indexical hypothesis based on (SR) is not conclusive. He says that there is a large range of cases where expressions “do vary in content from context to context like ordinary indexicals, but whose content in attitude report contexts is determined not by the context of the report but by some other context...” [Kölbel, 2008, p. 14]. Kölbel talks here precisely about examples that motivate a relativistic approach, namely utterances about values, utterances attributing knowledge, utterances involving epistemic models and utterances about contingent future. It seems that the second problem with the indexical proposal is equivalent to the question of whether there is any evidence for (SR) independent from these cases. If there is such evidence, then accepting the indexical approach would be possible only with the price of accepting a large number of counterexamples to (SR). If there is no such evidence, then it should not be taken as a problem for indexicalists.

I don’t think that (SR) is a valid principle. A sentence s might contain an indexical element and express one proposition in the context c_1 and express a different proposition in the context c_2 , and utterance by someone A of s in c_1 can be correctly reported in c_2 by using the form of words ‘ a said that s ’. This happens in cases where an indexical element is context-sensitive in such a way that the words ‘ a said that’ changes

the context c_2 enough, so that in this new context c'_2 ($c'_2 = c_2$ plus words ‘ a said that’) expresses the same proposition as in the context c_1 . The example with “local” constructed above was designed to show this. In my opinion, the second concern could be successfully explained away by indexicalists.

2.3 The Third Problem: The Disagreement

The third, perhaps, the most serious and famous problem with the indexical hypothesis is “the problem of disagreement” mentioned in section 1. The argument goes like this.

Imagine the following conversation between Heidi and I.

Me: Strawberries taste good.

Heidi: No. That’s false. Strawberries don’t taste good. They taste awful.

If I assert “Strawberries taste good”, Heidi can really disagree with me. We can have heated and productive discussion about the taste of strawberries. It is not the case that I am talking about my taste preferences, while Heidi talks about hers. This is the puzzle for an indexicalist. As we have seen, from the indexicalists’ view point, I make a statement about my own standard of taste, and Heidi speaks about hers. For an indexicalist, our disagreement does not exist. Indexical hypothesis falsely predicts that I could come to accept what Heidi has asserted without changing my mind. Therefore, indexicalism is wrong¹³.

As Kölbel points out, an indexicalist may reply that “Strawberries taste good” differs in its *meaning* from “On my standard, strawberries taste good”, though they express the same proposition in any context¹⁴. The difference between these statements is not a difference in semantic (propositional) content, rather a difference in the presuppositions made. According to indexicalists, the propositions asserted by me and Heidi are compatible. However, they are not compatible on the presupposition that my and Heidi’s standards converge.

Let me speculate a little about this. Does the sentence like “Strawberries taste good” express the same proposition as the sentence like “On my standard, strawberries

¹³[Kölbel, 2008, p.15]

¹⁴Ibid.

taste good” in any context? Is the difference between these expressions just the difference between the presuppositions conventionally triggered by them? If I could show that two expressions like these have different truth values in some context, it would mean that they express different propositions, since according to the indexicalists’ approach, propositions have absolute truth values.

Firstly, suppose I have very weird taste - I like the smell of rotten cabbage, and I know that nobody else in the entire universe shares my preferences. For the sake of argument, suppose also that I know what idiosyncratic event in my personal history is responsible for my strange affection, but I still believe that it is one of the most pleasurable smells I have ever experienced. Several friends come over to my place, where the thick smell of rotten cabbage is present. I want to share my joy from living in the nice environment, but I know that nobody else is capable of enjoying this wonderful smell. Intuitively, in these circumstances my willingness to assert the sentence “On my standard, rotten cabbage smells good” is much higher than my willingness to assert the sentence “Rotten cabbage smells good.”

Does this difference come from the presuppositions associated with these expressions, or from my evaluation of these propositions? A relatively easy test can be suggested to separate what is said from what is presupposed. Suppose I am a treacherous creature who wants to deliberately mislead people by saying something is true. I am willing to assert something to be true that has confusing implicature, so that nobody can accuse me of being a liar, but at the same time people will be misled. If indexicalists are correct, then I will be willing to assert “Rotten cabbage smells good” in the circumstances described above. However, it does not seem to be the case. It would be difficult for me to justify what I said. Consider the following conversation between Logician Pete, who among others came to my house, and I:

Treacherous Me: Rotten cabbage smells good!

Logician Pete: Do you know that rotten cabbage doesn’t smell good for other people?

Treacherous Me: Yes, I do.

Logician Pete: Then you lie. You violate a T-schema¹⁵ for statements of taste because you know that rotten cabbage does not smell good and still you assert that it does.

Treacherous Me: But on my standard rotten cabbage smells good!

Logician Pete: You did not say that *on your standard* rotten cabbage smells good, you said that rotten cabbage smells good and this is a general fact that has nothing to do with your particular taste.

In contrast with the example about Indexicalist Jonathan above, it seems that in this conversation it is hard for me to prove that I am right and Logician Pete is wrong. The surface grammar, which is often used as an evidence in debates, this time is not on my side. The conclusion might be that in the circumstances above “On my standard, rotten cabbage smells good” is true, but “Rotten cabbage smells good” is false and this is the problem for indexicalists. One possible indexicalist response might be the following.

An indexicalist might reply that the problem with this suggestion is that once I start to include other people’s evaluations, knowledge etc. in my truth evaluation, there is no natural place to stop. If I evaluate the proposition expressed in the sentence “Rotten cabbage smells good” as false in the case where it is only me who likes the smell of rotten cabbage, then the question arises when this proposition should be evaluated as true. Is it enough if two people around me share my standard of taste? Three? Fifteen? All people in the world? All sentient creatures in the world? There is no easy answer to this question. As Logician Pete pointed out, this statement has a form of a general fact, which means that presumably any bad smell experience of rotten cabbage could falsify it. Then very few, if any taste facts are true¹⁶.

¹⁵Propositional T-schema can be formulated as:

$$(T_{\text{prop}}): \ulcorner p \urcorner \text{ is true if and only if } p.$$

¹⁶Einheuser discusses a similar difficulty when she considers different forms of “indexical relativism”. According to her terminology, indexicalism is the view on which the statement like “Rotten cabbage smells good” expresses different propositions on different occasions on use. For Einheuser,

$$\ulcorner x \text{ tastes great} \urcorner \text{ is true iff } \forall t: x \text{ tastes great to } t$$

Now, let's consider another example. Captain Barbossa is cursed – he does not feel anymore and he forgot all tastes he has ever experienced. The poor Captain cannot taste strawberries or smell rotten cabbage. However, he has trustworthy informants who report to him taste facts like strawberries taste good or rotten cabbage smells bad¹⁷.

Suppose the following conversation takes place. Captain Barbossa has heard from his trusted old mate that green apples taste awesome and decides to share his new taste knowledge with Sparrow.

Captain Barbossa: Green apples taste great!

Jack Sparrow: No. That's rubbish. They taste awful. Only shore loafers like them!

One may have an inclination to say that if Captain Barbossa asserts “Green apples taste great,” he expresses a true proposition if his informants are reliable. And, at the same time, if he asserts: “On my standard, green apples taste great,” he expresses a false proposition, because on his current standard nothing has taste.

This is a controversial example. The natural reply is that “On my standard, green apples taste great” also expresses a true proposition if said by Barbossa, because he judges the proposition expressed in “Green apples taste great” to be true, and whether his standard is formed by his own feelings or by testimony from others is irrelevant. Another equally possible answer will be that both statements are actually false, because Captain Barbossa is not entitled to assert a statement of taste based on testimony from others. The justification for this answer will be that Barbossa cannot actually *taste*. Presumably, he just *knows*, but his knowledge could not be verified, and thus should not be asserted. I will return to this question in the last section. Let me say for now that this issue is emphasized if indexicalism is formulated in terms of “Green apples taste great to me” or “Green apples taste great for me.” When I say “On my standard...”, I emphasize the “knowledge aspect” of my evaluation in contrast with my feelings.

The intuitions about truth values are vague in this example. It is considerably less contentious to claim that in these circumstances Captain Barbossa's willingness to

amounts to a form of indexical relativism [Einheuser, 2008, 189-190]

¹⁷The Captain Barbossa case is akin to the famous Mary, the super-scientist example, which is widely discussed in philosophy of mind. See Jackson [1982].

assert the sentence “Green apples taste great” is higher than his willingness to assert the sentence “On my standard, green apples taste great.”

How would indexicalists explain Captain Barbosa’s case? According to the indexical approach, the difference between “Green apples taste great” and “On my standard, green apples taste great” comes from the conventional presuppositions triggered by these expressions. The statement “Green apples taste great” has conventionally attached presuppositions that the standards of taste of the speaker and his audience converge, while “On my standard, green apples taste great” does not trigger such presuppositions. Why is Captain Barbosa less willing to assert “On my standard, . . .” in the circumstances described above? It seems that indexicalists’ answer must be along the lines that Captain Barbosa is willing to emphasize that his standard of taste is not different from the standard of taste of his audience. Then he must be willing to assert something like “On my standard, green apples taste great and my standard of taste is similar to your standard of taste.” But it is not clear why Captain Barbosa would be willing to assert this. This, I think, suggests some evidence for propositional relativism.

Finally, let me consider an example in which a speaker and an evaluator are not the same. Suppose I like the taste of strawberries and believe that my taste is good. I find two notes, one says “Strawberries taste good” and the other “On my standard, strawberries taste good.” Could I evaluate these two notes? It seems that I will not be hesitant to evaluate the first one as expressing something true, but at the same time I will not have enough information to evaluate the second note because the information about the writer’s standard is missed. In general, if somebody tells me “On my standard, p ,” I rarely evaluate the proposition expressed, because to evaluate this proposition I need not only to have a good knowledge of p , but I also need to believe that my knowledge of the standard of the speaker is at least as good as the speaker’s knowledge of her own standard; and this is rarely the case. The example about two notes shows, I think persuasively, that a context of assessment must be built in the semantics of statements like “Strawberries taste good.” This also can be interpreted in favor of propositional relativism.

Do these examples show anything conclusive about the relativists/indexicalists debate? According to the indexicalists’ approach, if I have shown that these two expressions would have different truth values in some context, it would mean that they express

different propositions, because for indexicalists propositions have their truth values absolutely. However, it does not seem that we have clear intuitions about truth values in these cases. We most certainly can say that these two expressions have different meanings, but that won't help us to resolve the issue, because sentences with different meanings can express the same proposition. We can also say that in some cases willingness to assert one expression significantly differs from willingness to assert the other. However, this also does not help us to resolve the issue, because willingness to assert may be explained by presuppositions conventionally attached to the expressions. I've tried to show that in some cases the difference in meaning is hard to explain by presuppositions, and this gives us some evidence for propositional relativism.

It seems that both relativism and indexicalism legitimately deal with examples, and both have some important intuitions behind them. I think that this third problem is the most serious problem for the indexical approach in a sense of providing motivations for relativism, but it does not seem that this problem gives us any final word on the indexicalist–relativist debate.

Let me briefly summarize the issue. According to Kölbel, these three problems with the indexical proposal show that it is not easy to account for cases like “Strawberries taste good” within the standard semantic framework. It requires admitting exceptions to (SR) and making complex claims about non-truth-conditional aspects of meaning. This gives some motivation for relativism.

I have considered these three problems in some detail. I have disagreed with Kölbel in his evaluation of the first problem and showed that indexicalists must prove that the implicit structure is needed. I haven't found the second problem as convincing as Kölbel believes it is and have provided some examples to back up my claim. Finally, the third problem was investigated and some intuitions that support the relativist account were found, though it does not seem that they seriously undermine the indexicalist approach. Let me now consider a theory that goes deeper into this debate, focusing on the metaphysics of statements of taste.

3 Einheuser’s Factual Relativism

Iris Einheuser proposes another solution to the puzzle of faultless disagreement: factual relativism. Instead of relativizing propositional truth she suggests relativizing facts themselves¹⁸. As she puts it: “There is no need to further relativize propositional truth to a context of assessment as the relativizer has been built into the worlds” [Einheuser, 2008, p.190]. Einheuser’s solution is metaphysical. She simplifies semantics at the cost of more sophisticated metaphysics. In this section I try to examine what consequences such a complication of metaphysics may have. In the first subsection I outline the basics of Einheuser’s view, in the second I present her arguments for factual relativism, and in the third I raise some problems with her theory. I will argue that there is a dilemma for factual relativism; either it is not different from MacFarlane’s form of propositional relativism, or it has unusual metaphysical consequences.

3.1 The Basics of Einheuser’s View

If we apply Einheuser’s theory to our problematic case, we will have the following solution. When I assert “Strawberries taste good,” I assert something that is true of my perspectival world, and when Heidi asserts “Strawberries do not taste good,” she asserts a truth about her perspectival world. A perspectival world is a world “structured” by some particular perspective. According to Einheuser’s theory, there are two components that determine the truth of the sentence “Strawberries taste good.” One component, which Einheuser calls *a substratum* s , is provided by the world, by the physio-chemical features of strawberries and tasters. Another component is called *a perspective* p and is given by the psychological and physiological features of *particular* tasters. Though both components are determined by the world, it is not determined by the world from which specific perspective a taste-fact is evaluated. Over the same substratum, my perspective ‘induces the perspectival fact’ that strawberries taste good, while Heidi’s perspective ‘induces the perspectival fact’ that strawberries do not taste good [Einheuser, 2008, p.190].

Thus, for Einheuser, the truth of the statement of taste is determined by a pair $\langle s, p \rangle$: a possible world and a particular perspective together. Such a pair $\langle s, p \rangle$ is called a

¹⁸The similar approach is discussed in Wright [2008].

perspectival world. The propositional or semantic content of the sentence “Strawberries taste good” is the same when this sentence is asserted by me and by Heidi. Einheuser’s idea is that in factual relativism as well as in the standard semantic theory, a proposition has an absolute truth value. In the standard theory “an absolute truth value” is understood so that a proposition has its truth value relative only to a possible world. For a factual relativist, a proposition has its truth value relative only to “a perspectival possible world.”

To formulate her view, Einheuser distinguishes between particular facts - facts that something tastes good to particular tasters - and general facts - facts that something tastes good simpliciter. She also employs the distinction between subjective and objective facts. Objective facts are facts of a possible world. Subjective facts are facts of a perspectival possible world. Einheuser emphasizes that the statements in question have the form of general facts, and should be treated accordingly. As Einheuser expresses it, “the analysis given reconceptualizes objective particular taste facts as subjective general taste facts” [Einheuser, 2008, p.190]. Namely, the facts of a possible world that are true only for some particular tasters are considered as taste facts of a perspectival possible world that are true simpliciter¹⁹. Thus, when I assert “Strawberries taste good” I express the fact which is true simpliciter about my own perspectival world. My perspectival world can be represented as pair $\langle s_{@}, p_I \rangle$, where $s_{@}$ is the substratum of the actual world and p_I my perspective. Can Heidi know facts about my perspectival world $\langle s_{@}, p_I \rangle$?

To capture the difference between evaluating the statement of taste of one’s own perspectival world and evaluating across perspectives, Einheuser uses the notion of *correctness*²⁰. There are two different senses in which Heidi can evaluate my assertion. Firstly she can evaluate the propositional content of my assertion – by default she does that with respect to her own perspectival world, which can be represented by the pair $\langle s_{@}, p_H \rangle$, where $s_{@}$ is the substratum of the actual world and p_H is Heidi’s perspective. Heidi’s conclusion will be that my statement is false. Secondly she can evaluate the judgment made. In the assertion “Strawberries taste good” I make a judgment about my own perspectival world $\langle s_{@}, p_I \rangle$. By default, Heidi would evaluate this in respect to my perspectival world

¹⁹I will return to this issue in more detail in the section 3.3 below.

²⁰[Einheuser, 2008, p.196]

$\langle s_{@}, p_I \rangle$. Her evaluation will be that my statement is correct.

Einheuser applies a similar two-dimensional solution to modality. One may think that if possible worlds are substituted with perspectival possible worlds that a problem will arise. Imagine Heidi complains about my excessive use of garlic in the soup.

Example 3.1 Heidi: This soup might have tasted great!

If the possibility operator is be understood as the existential quantifier over all perspectival possible worlds – including other people’s worlds – that will give us a wrong result. The statement will be true even in cases where the soup tastes as garlicky to Heidi as it is in the actual world. To prevent this Einheuser employs two notions of possibility²¹: s -possibility \diamond_s - variations of the substratum and p -possibility \diamond_p - variations of the perspective²². The statement “This soup might have tasted great” is naturally understood in two ways. It is either that the soup might have had a different taste (s -possibility) or that I might have had a different standard (p -possibility). In the case described above Heidi quantifies over only s -possible perspectival worlds, worlds with the same perspective as hers but different substratums. I return to the modality issue in the last subsection, where I tackle the questions how should we understand perspectival worlds and whether we should take them ontologically seriously. Let me conclude this subsection by outlining how Einheuser situates herself in the theoretical space. How does factual relativism address the problem of disagreement?

Einheuser points out that there are three degrees of disagreement²³: mere syntactic, asserting incompatible contents, and asserting incompatible contents of the same

²¹[Einheuser, 2008, p.194]

²²[Einheuser, 2008, p.194] gives the following formal definitions of s -possibility and p -possibility:

$\diamond_s \phi$ is true at a world $w = \langle s, p \rangle$ if and only if there is a substratum s' such that ϕ is true at $w' = \langle s', p \rangle$ (i.e. if and only if ϕ is true at some world that differs from w only in virtue of its substratum).

$\diamond_p \phi$ is true at a world $w = \langle s, p \rangle$ if and only if there is a perspective p' such that ϕ is true at $w' = \langle s, p' \rangle$ (i.e. if and only if ϕ is true at some world that differs from w only in virtue of its perspective).

²³[Einheuser, 2008, p.193]

possible world. Indexicalists treat only the first, the weakest form of disagreement. According to them, we utter contradictory sentences, but contents we express are compatible. Neither are our beliefs contradictory, nor do we assert contradictory representational contents of the same possible world. Propositional relativists try to accommodate the strongest form of disagreement. According to them, the proposition I express is the denial of the proposition Heidi expresses, and we assert these contradictory propositions of the same possible world. What makes our disagreement faultless is that we evaluate the same possible world from different perspectives. Factual relativism deals with middle disagreement. I express the denial of the proposition Heidi expresses, but we assert contradictory propositional contents of different possible perspectival worlds.

Having presented the basics of Einheuser's view, let me sketch her arguments supporting factual relativism.

3.2 Evidence for Factual Relativism

What is the evidence for factual relativism? Einheuser gives several reasons to think that factual relativism is plausible. Firstly, in contrast with indexicalism, this solution preserves the propositional relativists' intuition that Heidi and I can really argue about the taste of strawberries. Our disagreement is not merely syntactic. Heidi expresses the denial of the proposition I express.

Secondly, and most importantly, Einheuser claims that her theory has some advantages over propositional relativism. Traditionally, propositions are understood as representational contents of indicative sentences on an occasion of use. But what is represented by propositions in propositional relativism? For a propositional relativist, a perspective is an additional parameter alongside a possible world to which truth value is sensitive. What exact role does a perspective play? Einheuser considers two options and argues that on the first construal, propositions do not represent any particular state of affairs, while on the second, propositions 'represent what *appear to be* the wrong state of affairs' [Einheuser, 2008, p.200-p.201]²⁴.

The first option is that a perspective determines which fact a proposition represents. According to such a view, there is no specific fact that a proposition represents.

²⁴Italics is mine.

It represents a fact relative to a perspective. The proposition 「Strawberries taste good」 taken from my perspective represents the fact that strawberries taste good to me. The same proposition relative to Heidi's perspective falsely represents the fact that strawberries don't taste good for her. Einheuser claims that while such a role of a perspective is possible and such a proposition has a theoretically important position, it does not have much intuitive appeal.

The second option Einheuser describes by analogy with a three-dimensional object, along with its shapes, that is represented by two-dimensional pictures [Einheuser, 2008, p.201]. A two-dimensional picture (a proposition) correctly represents an objective shape (an objective fact) relative to some perspective and misrepresents it relative to another perspective. On such interpretation, a taste proposition represents the fact that strawberries have a particular physio-chemical structure, not how they taste. Both propositions, "Strawberries taste good", asserted by me, and "Strawberries do not taste good", asserted by Heidi, represent correctly the same objective fact. But they represent it from different perspectives. Einheuser thinks that this solution is implausible because usually we don't think that the statement of taste represents a fact that strawberries has physio-chemical structure xyz. On her view, the idea that contradictory propositions can both correctly represent the same fact is unusual and requires a significant departure from the standard view on propositions.

What do taste propositions represent in factual relativism? Not surprisingly, according to Einheuser, the proposition "Strawberries taste good" represents exactly the fact that strawberries taste good. They do not represent the fact that strawberries has particular physio-chemical structure. This perspectival or how-fact is determined by a pair: the substratum and a particular perspective. Using the metaphor from the previous construal, a proposition represents not an objective shape (whatever it is), 'but the fact that the object looks rhomboidal' [Einheuser, 2008, p.202].

Einheuser does not think that she presents decisive arguments against propositional relativism. However, she does think that her view is "preferable as it preserves the close link between the propositional content of a statement and the fact represented by that content" [Einheuser, 2008, p.188]. In the next subsection, I will discuss Einheuser's arguments, consider the ontology of perspectival worlds in some detail, and raise some

problems for factual relativism.

3.3 Problems for Factual Relativism

Are the arguments for factual relativism persuasive? I think for answer this question we should look more closely at the ontology of perspectival possible worlds.

As we have seen above in the subsection 3.1, Einheuser makes two pairs of distinctions between taste facts: particular vs. general facts and subjective vs. objective facts. She proposes to understand objective particular taste facts as subjective general taste facts. But what exactly does she mean? Einheuser says:

“The world itself, independent of any particular tasters determines the physio-chemical features of items on the basis of which tasters classify them as tasting good or bad. The world thus uniquely determines the physio-chemical features of individual tasters which are responsible for their classifying certain items as tasting good or bad. The world thus uniquely determines the particular facts yet not the general ones” [Einheuser, 2008, p.190].

What does it mean to determine all particular facts but not the general ones? It can be interpreted so that for all tasters in all possible worlds, their sensibilities are determined in each world in a sense that if we ask any question about the taste of a particular person in this particular world, we will have a definite answer provided by the world itself. On the other hand, the counterpart relation that maps all sentient creatures in the one world to their counterparts in other worlds is not determined by this world. Nor does the world determine which particular experience there would correspond to my particular experience in this world.

Let me illustrate the point. Consider the example about the smell of rotten cabbage in the section 2.3 above. There is a particular sensation I experience that I try to capture and express by saying that rotten cabbage smells good. What does correspond to this particular sensation in other possible worlds? The answer to this question, according to my interpretation of Einheuser, is not given by this world. It is given by my perspective.

Einheuser draws these distinctions to illustrate her approach of factoring “the relativizer” into worlds themselves. But what does it mean to factor “relativizer” into a

possible world? Facts of a possible world that are true, only evaluated by some particular habitants of this world, are reinterpreted as facts of a perspectival possible world which are true simpliciter of this world. According to Einheuser’s approach, “Strawberries do not taste good” is a general truth about Heidi’s perspectival world. This statement is true simpliciter of Heidi’s perspectival world. From our setting, this proposition is not true as evaluated by me²⁵. Does it mean that I am not “in” Heidi’s perspectival world? The answer to this question is ambiguous. One can say that as my perspectival world is different from Heidi’s perspectival world, we are in a different worlds²⁶. Still, I certainly exist in the substratum of Heidi’s perspectival world, which means that in some sense I must inhabit her perspectival world. How is it possible for me to exist and not to exist in Heidi’s perspectival world?

It seems that Einheuser should not only employ two notions of truth (truth and correctness) and two notions of possibility (*s*-possibility and *p*-possibility), but also two notions of inhabiting a perspectival possible world, or existing in a perspectival world. I will designate them as *s*-existence, existence in the substratum, and *p*-existence, sharing a perspective. Perspectival possible worlds which are defined as pairs $\langle s, p \rangle$, where *s* is the substratum and *p* is a perspective, must have two-dimensional ontology. The idea of a two-dimensional ontology is unusual. If one thinks that only *s*-existence, existence in the substratum, makes sense, then one is committed to the claim that factual relativism is identical to propositional relativism. If, in contrast, one thinks that a perspective induces at least some ontological commitments, then one should accept a rather peculiar ontology. Let me now discuss each of these options in turn.

Suppose that only *s*-existence is existence *per se*. Thus, an object, a property, or a fact exists in a perspectival possible world, if and only if it exists in the substratum of this perspectival world. In some sense, Einheuser seems to be an adherent of this view, as she says that the physio-chemical features of the world determine both particular features of items which tasters classify and the particular physio-chemical features of tasters which are responsible for classifying [Einheuser, 2008, p.190]. She also says that “Facts and meanings are theoretical concepts introduced to systematically account for our behavior

²⁵Though, as we have seen above, I may evaluate this statement as *correct* if it is made by Heidi, and I have adequate knowledge of her perspectival world.

²⁶Max Kölbel mentions this “radical sounding consequence” of Einheuser’s view [Kölbel, 2008, p.34].

and cognitive interaction with the world” [Einheuser, 2008, p.189]. Then the question arises in what sense do we talk about perspectival possible worlds as worlds? If they are just theoretical constructs, they are not different from pairs $\langle w, p \rangle$, a possible world w and a perspective p , to which truth values of propositions are relative for propositional relativists.

Recall from the first section how the sentence “Strawberries taste good” is analyzed on MacFarlane’s framework. The truth value of this proposition is relative to the world of the context of use and the standard of taste of the assessor at the context of assessment. According to Einheuser, facts vary across contexts of assessments. But is there any difference between Einheuser’s “facts” and MacFarlane’s propositions, if facts are just theoretical constructs? MacFarlane’s propositional relativism has it that if Rachel assesses my statement to be true of my actual world w_I according to her standard of taste p_r , then she must consider Heidi’s statement to be false of Heidi’s actual world w_h , according to the same standard of taste p_r . This explains why Heidi disagrees with me when I assert “Strawberries taste good.” Heidi evaluates the proposition expressed by me as false of my actual world according to her standard of taste $\langle w_I, p_h \rangle$. I evaluate the proposition expressed by her as false of her actual world according to my standard of taste $\langle w_h, p_I \rangle$. Our disagreement is faultless because what I assert is true in my context of assessment and what Heidi asserts is true in her context of assessment.

How is factual relativists’ explanation different? When I assert “Strawberries taste good” I express the fact which is true simpliciter about my own perspectival world. My perspectival world can be represented as pair $\langle s_{@}, p_I \rangle$, where $s_{@}$ is the substratum of the actual world and p_I my perspective. When Heidi asserts the same statement she expresses the fact which is true of her perspectival world $\langle s_{@}, p_H \rangle$. If Rachel evaluates our statements she would evaluate it of our world from her perspective $\langle s_{@}, p_r \rangle$.

Calling a possible world the substratum, and calling pairs $\langle s, p \rangle$, a substratum s and a perspective p , perspectival possible worlds does not make the factual relativism different from the propositional relativism.

I do not think that Einheuser should support the idea that only existence in the substratum is existence in a perspectival possible world. She needs perspectival facts, or how-facts in her ontology, and for her, these facts are obviously not facts of the substratum.

Thus, ontology of perspectival worlds needs at least to be rich enough to include these facts. Consider the following example: I hold that Heidi is beautiful. Then there is a fact of my perspectival world that Heidi is beautiful. Therefore, it seems that there are at least some ontological commitments partly issued by my perspective, not by the substratum alone²⁷.

Let us now return to the question of whether I exist in Heidi's perspectival world and Heidi exists in mine. Everybody will agree that Heidi *s*-exists in my perspectival world, but it also seems uncontroversial that she does not *p*-exist in my world. Though, we live in the same substratum, we have different perspectives and different perspectival worlds. Then we obtain a fairly unusual result. Namely, Heidi does not *p*-exist in my world, but the fact that Heidi is beautiful is in my perspectival world. Two-dimensional ontology does not seem to be appealing.

Let's assume for the sake of our examination that a coherent two-dimensional ontology of perspectival worlds could be given. Then the question is whether these technically useful notions of 'a perspective' and 'a perspectival world' reflect properly our metaphysical intuitions in the case of faultless disagreement.

When Heidi and I discuss the taste of strawberries, we no doubt hold that our beliefs correspond to something in reality. Moreover, we believe about something in reality that it is a certain way²⁸. We make a *judgment* about reality. On Einheuser's view, Heidi judges the world structured by her perspective that it is in some way, namely that "Strawberries do not taste good" and I judge the world structured by my perspective that it is in the opposite way, namely that "Strawberries taste good." From Einheuser's point of view, Heidi and I are talking about different perspectival worlds. Suppose Einheuser is correct, and both Heidi and I know that when we make statements of taste, we judge our own perspectival worlds and our worlds are different. Then it would not make sense for us to argue about the taste of strawberries, because we do not have any common reality of taste to discuss. In contrast with indexicalism, according to factual relativism, there is a genuine disagreement between Heidi and myself. We disagree in reality, so to speak. Disagreement is not a problem for factual relativism. The problem, I think, is that our

²⁷As Einheuser puts it, a taste fact is 'induced' by a perspective over the substratum [Einheuser, 2008, p.190].

²⁸At least we optimistically hope that we are capable of having beliefs about reality.

disagreement is so deep, that there is no point for Heidi and me to argue about the taste of strawberries.

Heidi Beutow suggested the following parallel to illustrate this point: Imagine that I try to argue with my twin in another possible world, where the moon is green, about the color of the moon. I assert truly that moon is white, and my twin asserts truly that the moon is green. Certainly, this debate does not make any sense because I and my twin don't have any common moon to argue about.

When Heidi and I talk about the taste of strawberries, we are trying to understand each other and find the correct way to represent the world. We presuppose that there is some common reality of taste for both of us, even though we have different standards of taste and see the world from different perspectives. Einheuser's argument is that expressing the same propositional contents allows us to talk about the taste strawberries and understand each other. It does not seem to be an answer to the question of what common reality do we have to talk about. If we do not have any common reality of taste, it does not make sense to argue about it, because agreement could not possibly be reached.

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