

Relativism and the metaphysics of value

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Abstract: I argue that relativists about evaluative language face some of the same objections as non-naturalists in ethics. If these objections have force, there is reason to doubt the existence of relative evaluative states of affairs. If they do not exist, then relativism leads to an error theory. This is unattractive, as the position was specifically designed to preserve the truth of many evaluative claims.

Relativism attracts interest as a semantics for evaluative language.¹ Although I will mostly focus on one variety, the issues I raise pertain to all views that allow the truth value of an evaluative proposition to vary with some subjective factor, such as a standard of taste or subjective responses.

Although relativism is often used to interpret (apparently subjective) statements like ‘Rhubarb is delicious’ and ‘The roller coaster ride was fun’, it can in principle be applied to moral and aesthetic language too. Max Kölbel (2002) shows how his version can allow for different grades of objectivity to deal with such domains.

Most critical discussions focus on whether relativism can provide genuine disagreement between speakers with different values (e.g. Francén 2010), but I will focus on the *metaphysics* required to make it work. Relativism is primarily a view about the meaning of evaluative statements, and analyses of meaning do not normally guarantee that any particular statement is in fact true. This depends on whether what is represented by the proposition expressed actually exists. I will raise doubts about the existence of relative evaluative states of affairs.

I realize that most of the arguments put forward will seem weak to philosophers who are not at all worried about non-naturalism in ethics. Thus, part of this paper can be seen as an attempt to show that certain arguments raised against non-naturalism also apply to relativist views. I think this is surprising and hopefully interesting in itself, but I also take it that people drawn to relativism about some evaluative domain are more likely to share the worries raised by critics of ethical non-naturalism.

The paper is organised as follows: section 1 distinguishes relativism from contextualism. Section 2 raises metaphysical concerns, and section 3 discusses a particular way of answering them.

1. Contextualism and relativism

Contextualists about moral language think that statements like

‘Torturing for fun is wrong’

implicitly refer to standards. They believe such statements are implicitly about the relation in which acts stand to the relevant standards. Thus, contextualists might say that ‘Torturing for fun is wrong’ means that torturing for fun is forbidden by standard so-and-so (usually some standard to which the speaker is committed).

¹ When I say ‘evaluative language’ I do not mean to restrict myself to claims like ‘X is good / beautiful / delicious’. I also mean to cover statements like ‘X is right’, ‘One ought to do X’ and ‘There is reason to X’. So ‘evaluative language’ should be taken to mean ‘normative and/or evaluative language’.

This view has various problems. The most important ones stem from conversational patterns that do not seem to fit this analysis of moral language. To illustrate, let's assume that in the case of (sincere) moral utterances the relevant standards are indeed the speaker's. Let's further assume that John is committed to a standard which encourages torturing for fun. Contextualism entails that if John says

'Torturing for fun is right'

then what he says is true. But we are not inclined to say that it is true. We are more inclined to say:

'Are you crazy, torturing for fun is wrong!'.²

Contextualism also entails that if John says:

'Torturing for fun is right'

and Sara:

'Torturing for fun is not right',

then so long as John refers to a different standard than Sara, they don't really disagree with one another (at least not in the sense that John takes a different view about the truth of the same proposition as Sara). This is known as *the problem of disagreement*.

These problems and related ones explain much of the appeal of the relativist alternative. Relativists believe that evaluative propositions are true or false relative to contextually determined standards, but that these propositions are not *about* standards, the people holding them, or the relation in which either people or things or actions stand to them (e.g. MacFarlane 2007a and Kölbel 2002). So, according to the relativist about moral language, when John says:

'Torturing for fun is right'

he is not saying anything about the relation in which torturing for fun stands to any standards. Nevertheless, the *truth* of the statement does depend on standards (it is *relative* to standards). Which standards? According to MacFarlane, the relevant standards are those of an *assessor* of the proposition (2005, 2007a).³ So it's wrong to say that 'Torturing for fun is right' is true just in case torturing for fun is required by *John's* standards. This is so only if John is the assessor of the proposition. But if *we* assess the proposition, it is false.

So relativists believe that although moral statements are not (even implicitly) *about* standards, or their requirements, or the relationship in which things stand to standards, nevertheless their truth or falsity does depend on standards. How is this supposed to work?

In formal semantics, the truth value of a proposition varies with the 'circumstances of evaluation', which are usually taken to include at least (and at most) a possible world (MacFarlane 2005, p. 307 and 2007b, p. 246). But the fact that something holds at the actual rather than some other possible world is not normally thought of as part of what is said. For example, the proposition expressed by

² I doubt that ordinary speakers would say: 'That's false', but that is probably irrelevant. What matters is that speakers say things that appear to entail the falsehood of claims like John's.

³ Different versions of relativism take different views about which standards matter. Kölbel (2002) thinks that in the case of moral language, the relevant standards might be ones held by certain groups.

‘grass is green’ is not ‘grass is green in world x ’, because else it would be true (or false) as evaluated from all possible worlds. If this makes sense, it should also make sense to put other elements into the circumstances of evaluation:

'Taking this line of thought a little farther, the relativist might envision contents that are "sense-of-humor neutral" or "standard-of-taste neutral" or "epistemic-state neutral," and circumstances of evaluation that include parameters for a sense of humor, a standard of taste, or an epistemic state. This move would open up room for the truth value of a proposition to vary with these "subjective" factors in much the same way that it varies with the world of evaluation. The very same proposition – say, that apples are delicious – could be true with respect to one standard of taste, false with respect to another.' (MacFarlane 2007a, pp. 21-22.)

So in the case of moral language, the content could be "moral-standard neutral", but nonetheless true or false depending on a standard.

This view is supposed to solve many of the problems that contextualism faces. It certainly explains why we are not inclined to call John's statement true. After all, MacFarlane says that it is true iff it is true relative to the standards of an assessor. If *we* are the assessor, then our standards make it false. It also allows that Sara and John take different views about the truth value of the same proposition.

Relativism seems ideally suited to the antirealist about morality. On the one hand, it allows that the moral facts depend on variable standards or values. On the other, it predicts many of the right linguistic patterns, without giving up descriptivism (the view that moral language is fact-stating). But I think these advantages come at a price: relativists require states of affairs the existence of which may be doubted.

2. Relativistic metaphysics of value

Relativists appeal to formal semantics in order to motivate the possibility of “moral-standard neutral” propositions, propositions whose truth value varies with a moral standard (and *mutatis mutandis* for gustatory or aesthetic propositions). It seems to me, however, that relativists should do a bit more than suggest this possibility. They should also make a case that the states of affairs represented by such propositions exist. Relativism is, after all, motivated in part by the desire to retain the *truth* of judgements about value. It is not supposed to be a kind of error theory.

Clearly, however, an analysis of the content of a statement does not ordinarily tell us, all by itself, whether the statement is true. It is a further question whether that content corresponds to anything in reality. Let us say that evaluative propositions depict evaluative states of affairs. Do *relative* evaluative states of affairs exist (evaluative states of affairs as the relativist conceives of them)?

One reason why it is not obvious that relative evaluative states of affairs exist is the following. The formal apparatus to which the relativist appeals allows the relativisation of truth to anything we like: standards of taste, times, the state of my hair, etc. But, clearly, not all relativizations make sense. For example, saying that 'Smoking causes cancer' is true relative to the state of my hair is nonsense. It is nonsense because there is no relationship between the cancer-causing tendencies of smoking and the state of my hair. Since the proposition represents the state of affairs that smoking causes cancer *and* this fact does not in any way depend on the state of my hair, state-of-my-hair relativism about the proposition is implausible.

The foregoing does not mean that contexts of assessment cannot contain parameters that are idle in some cases, or whose contribution in determining the truth value of a proposition in a context is nil. The point is rather that the truth of 'Smoking causes cancer' does not *vary* depending on the state of my hair, so that this parameter cannot make a difference to the truth of the proposition expressed. The relativist about evaluative language needs the value of the standard-parameter to make a *difference* to the truth value of evaluative propositions. Whether that makes sense depends on the nature of their content.

What is the content of an evaluative claim, according to the relativist? I think we know two things: first, that it is irreducible to other types of content (or at least irreducible to those that figure in extant rival analyses). For suppose the content of an evaluative statement was the same as that given by other analyses of evaluative language (a contextualist analysis, say, or a Cornell realist one). In that case, it would be mysterious how the perspective of an assessor could make any difference to whether or not the evaluative state of affairs obtained (in the same way in which it would be mysterious how the truth of 'Smoking causes cancer' could vary depending on the state of my hair). Second, the content of an evaluative statement is not relational (to subjective standards, perspectives or responses). After all, if it were, relativists would inherit the contextualist's problem of disagreement (people would not be discussing the same subject matter). So what is represented by an evaluative proposition is a way the world is considered apart from the relation in which things stand to standards or subjective responses. Thus, one might as well say the proposition represents a way the world is *independent* of assessors.

I think these properties of evaluative contents give rise to doubts about the existence of the requisite states of affairs. Notice first that non-naturalists in ethics share the relativist's belief that the content of evaluative statements is irreducible. It cannot be analysed in terms of anything else, or at least not in non-evaluative terms. I further take it that the relativist shares the non-naturalist's view that evaluative propositions are true insofar as what they represent obtains. Since the content of an evaluative proposition is irreducible, its truth plausibly depends on the existence of irreducible, evaluative states of affairs. Some (and I suspect all) antirealists about morality are suspicious of irreducible evaluative states of affairs. For instance, in a recent book, Jonas Olson defends an error theory about moral language. The error would be due to the fact that moral language involves a commitment to irreducibly normative reasons, which are facts that have the irreducible property of being such as to count in favour of or against something:

'The irreducibly normative favouring relation is not reducible to an action's property of being a means to the satisfaction of some desire, or an action's property of being in accord with some rule or norm. When the irreducibly normative favouring relation obtains between some fact and some course of behaviour, that fact is an irreducibly normative reason to take this course of behaviour. Such irreducibly normative favouring relations appear metaphysically mysterious. How can there be such relations?' (2014, p. 136)

Notice that nothing in this objection appears to depend on the fact that moral reasons are *objective features of the world*, if by this we mean that they exist independently of desires or rules. Rather, the objection seems to be that normative facts that do not *consist* in relations to desires or rules are mysterious. This objection, if it has any force, targets the relativist as much as the non-naturalist. For the relativist too is committed to the existence of irreducible, non-relational evaluative states of affairs. Granted, these states of affairs obtain depending on a relation to assessors, but they do not *consist* in such relations. If they did, then relativism would not improve on contextualism; it would also be committed to the idea that the content of an evaluative proposition is a relational state of

affairs. So it seems relativists are subject to (one version of) Mackie's argument from queerness: evaluative states of affairs, as the relativist conceives of them, would have to be entities of a very different kind from anything else known in the universe.

Olson notes that non-naturalists in ethics may respond in the following way to his question how there could be irreducible favouring relations:

'Non-naturalists can retort that it is not clear what kind of explanation we ask for here. They could maintain that it is a fundamental fact about reality that there are irreducibly normative reason relations, and they could refuse head-on to admit they there is anything *queer* about such relations.' (2014, p. 136)

I take it, though, that relativists are comparatively less happy than non-naturalists to respond in this way. After all, relativism is itself motivated by a picture of the world much like the ordinary antirealist's. This picture is one in which reality as it is independent of assessors does not host evaluative facts, and such that evaluative facts are somehow the *result* of human evaluative activity. If it turned out that relativists require evaluative states of affairs that cannot be understood in terms of such activity, then that may raise concerns.

One might add that an additional source of queerness is the fact that the relativist's irreducible and non-relational states of affairs are *brought into existence* by standards, even though those states of affairs do not involve relations to standards. Jesse Prinz, for instance, says:

'[truth relativism] seems to imply that the very same property, say wrongness, would come and go depending on who happens to be making a moral claim; if "wrong" always refers to the very same property, why should that property wax and wane as a function of linguistic context?' (2007, p. 182)

So relativists might be worse off than non-naturalists in the sense that non-naturalists can explain why their moral properties do not wax and wane as a function of linguistic context: they do not wax and wane in this way precisely because they are non-relational properties. The relativist seems to lack an explanation why properties that are otherwise identical to the non-naturalist's behave differently.

Here, though, it seems relativists might respond as follows. Many things are such that they "come and go" depending on the value of some parameter. Grass is green only in some worlds and not in others. Some would say that Socrates is sitting only relative to some times, but not relative to others. Why should it be any more mysterious that evaluative facts depend on parameters for standards?

I think this response is to some extent just, although it hardly dispels all worries about relative evaluative properties. It is not mysterious how whether grass is green can depend on the world we are considering. Worlds are, after all, *constituted* by the facts that hold in them. I don't think relativists can say that standards are similarly constituted by the evaluative states of affairs whose obtaining depends on them. First, if standards were so constituted, then the nature or essence of evaluative states of affairs would be independent of standards (the latter would, after all, be *composed* of the former), which would make it unclear why evaluative states of affairs could not obtain irrespective of anyone's values. Second, if standards were composed of evaluative states of affairs that obtain only relative to something in addition to a world, then non-evaluative statements

about standards (such as: standard S entails so-and-so) would have to be true or false only relative to something in addition to a world. This does not appear to be the case.

The relativity to times of tensed facts may be more similar to the relativity of wrongness to standards, unless times are constituted by the tensed facts that they “contain”. Even if that’s not the case, however, it is controversial whether there *are* any tensed propositions. That diminishes the dialectical force of the appeal to time-relativity.

But even if one finds nothing queer about irreducible normative states of affairs that wax and wane depending on the judge, relativists still face a justificatory problem. Non-naturalists are often challenged to justify the postulation of irreducible evaluative states of affairs, and if that’s a reasonable challenge, I think the relativist faces it too. The difference between relativists and non-naturalists is that whereas the latter think there are irreducible evaluative states of affairs that obtain regardless of the standards of assessors, relativists believe there are such states of affairs that obtain *depending* on the standards of assessors. As far as I can tell, no one else admits this kind of thing in their ontology. This is to some extent surprising. Whereas one would have thought that relativists, like other antirealists about evaluative reality, are ontologically conservative, this is in fact not so. Relativists add a unfamiliar stock of properties and facts. Such a move requires justification: why should we think that they exist?

One way of answering this question is by showing that the relevant properties do explanatory work. Might the perception of evaluative properties play a role in our acquisition of evaluative beliefs? This seems unlikely. Surely the relativist does not need anything *in addition* to the fact that people respond in various ways to the world, or develop certain standards in order to explain how they come to make evaluative judgements. So this cannot justify the postulation of relative evaluative states of affairs.

Furthermore, if the perception of evaluative properties did play a role in the acquisition of evaluative beliefs (and this involved something over and above the recognition that certain things meet or fail to meet relevant standards), we would face the question why correct and incorrect perception exactly matched a person’s standards or responses. Why does a person with standard S (correctly) perceive X as beautiful, when a person with standard not-S (correctly) perceives it to be ugly, if a thing’s beauty or ugliness does not consist in meeting or failing to meet their respective standards?

It seems the answer must be that the fact that something is beautiful, say, is *brought about* by having the relevant standards, even though that fact itself does not involve those standards. This, however, makes for a cumbersome story about evaluative perception. That story would go something like this: first, people come to have various standards (sort the world in various ways according to some criterion). These standards then bring into existence irreducible and non-relational value facts. People then perceive those value facts and make normative judgements as a result. Contrast this with a story according to which people sort the world in various ways according to some criterion and make value judgements on that basis. This seems much more credible. So it does not seem as if the perception of evaluative properties could support the existence of relative evaluative states of affairs. I struggle to see what else might do this, so long as evaluative properties do not consist in functions of a certain kind. I will return to this below.

How about the sheer fact that such properties make evaluative statements come out true, and preserve certain conversational patterns? We might be fairly sure that ‘Apples are delicious’ is

sometimes true, and we may also be fairly sure that the statement cannot be understood as implicitly about the responses or standards of people. So we are justified in postulating the existence of relative evaluative properties because they fit our linguistic behaviours.

This strikes me as an odd dialectical manoeuvre. If our linguistic behaviours are not themselves in part *explained* by the fact that we detect relative evaluative properties (as I've just argued they are not), why should such behaviours lend support to their existence? If there is some reason to doubt the existence of certain entities, we need more than an appeal to the fact that we seem to talk about them and behave as if some of our statements were true. And I think there is some reason to doubt their existence.

Earlier, I distinguished two different properties of the contents of evaluative propositions as the relativist conceives of them. The first was irreducibility: evaluative contents have to be irreducible to other kinds of content, since reducibility would make it mysterious why their truth could vary with standards (in the same way in which one cannot simply assert that the truth of 'Smoking causes cancer' varies with the state of my hair). The second was non-relationality: evaluative propositions do not represent relational states of affairs, like 'A is forbidden by standard S' or 'A is such as to cause a certain response in X'. If they did, the relativist would face similar difficulties as contextualists, who are often accused (not least by relativists themselves) of revising instead of analysing the content of evaluative statements. So the relativist is committed to the idea that evaluative propositions represent the world as it is apart from any relations to assessors, their standards or responses. But I think there is a tension between the relativist's semantic and metaphysical commitments.

The tension can be brought out very simply: part of what motivates relativism is the idea that the world as it is apart from assessors does not contain any value facts. But then, if evaluative propositions are supposed to represent a way the world is *apart* from its relation to assessors, there is nothing in that world for them to represent. So it seems a correct (true) evaluative representation would have to represent a *perspective* on the world, as there are no perspectiveless evaluative states of affairs. That, however, would expose relativists to the problems of contextualism: if I represent perspective P and you perspective Q, we are talking past each other. So the relativist's metaphysical commitments rob her of a suitable representational content for evaluative propositions.

If the foregoing arguments work, and relativism is the correct account of the semantics of evaluative discourse, then it leads to an error theory: if there are no irreducible, non-relational evaluative states of affairs, then propositions that represent them cannot be true *whether or not truth is relative to a standard or perspective*. However, an error-theoretic form of relativism has little appeal. After all, it was specifically designed in order to preserve the truth of certain evaluative statements.

3. Properties as functions

I have listed four objections to evaluative states of affairs as the relativist conceives of them. The first was an argument from queerness: evaluative facts that do not consist in relations to subjective responses or standards are mysterious. The second was a different argument from queerness: not only are relative evaluative states of affairs irreducible and non-relational, they also wax and wane depending on the standards of a judge. The third was an argument from explanatory impotence: relative evaluative states of affairs don't seem to explain anything. The fourth was an argument from incoherence: evaluative propositions are supposed to represent a way the world is independent

of assessors, but according to relativists themselves, there *is* no evaluative way the world is independent of assessors.

These objections all presuppose at least three theses: (1) that evaluative propositions are (in the relativist framework) representational, (2) that faithful representation is a relation between two distinct entities (a representation and what is represented) and (3) that evaluative properties do not consist in functions.

Take (1), the thesis that evaluative propositions are representational. If the relativist denied this, then no objection that appeals to the nature of what is represented could get off the ground. Since all four arguments depend on this, all of them would fail.

Or take (2), the thesis that faithful representation is a relation between two distinct entities (a representation and what is represented). All four objections depend on the idea that a representation is correct or incorrect depending on the existence of something independent of the representation, namely what it represents. The four objections target the existence of the requisite independent item. This means that if no independent state of affairs was needed for faithful representation, none of the objections would work.

I take it, though, that relativists are not interested in denying that evaluative propositions are representational. For if they gave up this idea, it would become unclear how their position is distinct from expressivism. Expressivists deny that evaluative language is fact-stating. Stating a fact involves at least representing the world as being a certain way. I further take it that it is not sensible to reject the idea that faithful representation is a relation between two distinct entities, the representation and what is represented. Or at least I do not see why that should be attractive.

That leaves us with thesis (3), the claim that evaluative properties do not consist in functions. Here's why this is relevant. Some philosophers identify properties, like being triangular, with a function from a possible world to a set of individuals (the extension of the property at that world). To exemplify a property at a world is then a matter of falling within the extension at that world. Of course, relativists maintain that being delicious or beautiful is not merely relative to a world. It is also relative to a standard of taste. So the property of being delicious cannot be a function from a world to a set of individuals, but has to be a function from a world + standard of taste to a set of individuals.

Suppose the relativist said that evaluative properties simply *are* functions from a <world, standard> pair to a set of individuals (an idea suggested by Brogaard 2008). This may help with responding to the four objections. Objections one and two were arguments from queerness. But presumably even people drawn to such arguments think that functions exist. If functions exist, and evaluative properties are functions, then there is no particular problem with the existence of evaluative properties. Furthermore, identifying properties with functions explains why the property of being delicious is itself independent of our responses to the world, while the exemplification of the property does depend on our responses. Functions are abstract objects and therefore independent of human responses like enjoyment. But whether an object exemplifies the property of being delicious *does* depend on variable responses, since the function that 'is delicious' denotes takes standards as arguments.

The third argument was that relative evaluative states of affairs had no explanatory power. But, presumably, there is some reason to think functions exist. And if functions exist, then it is plausible that all possible functions exist, including those that constitute relative evaluative properties. In that

case, there is no special burden on the relativist to justify the postulation of relative evaluative properties.

It is not immediately clear how the idea that evaluative properties are functions bears on the fourth argument against relativism. That argument was that evaluative propositions are supposed to represent a way the world is independent of assessors, whereas according to relativists themselves, there *is* no evaluative way the world is independent of assessors.

Perhaps relativists can say the following: if one identifies properties with functions, one will also identify propositions with functions from possible worlds (and perhaps other things) to truth values. One could then add that what it is for a proposition to represent a way the world is, is for the function which constitutes the proposition to deliver a certain distribution of truth values across possible worlds. If that is right, then the fourth argument can be resisted. For in that case, all it takes for a proposition like ‘Apples are delicious’ to represent a way the world is, is for it to deliver a certain distribution of truth values. There is no doubt that it does this.

Before I discuss the idea that properties are functions, note that if the only way for relativists to resist the objections is by identifying properties with functions, their view would stand or fall with this controversial view. That seems undesirable. But I also think that properties are not in fact functions. I’ll give three arguments. Some of them are directed at an identification of *nonrelative* properties with functions. But I take it that if the view that properties are functions is not plausible in the case of nonrelative properties, it is not plausible in the case of relative properties either.

First, it just doesn’t *seem* as if properties are functions. George Bealer expresses this thought as follows:

‘How implausible that familiar sensible properties are functions - the color of this ink, the aroma of coffee, the shape of your hand, the special painfulness of a burn or itchiness of a mosquito bite. No function is a color, a smell, a shape, or a feeling.’ (Bealer 1989, p. 1)

To me, identifying properties with functions is conflating a tool for modelling properties with those properties themselves, in the same way in which a graph that represents the temperature of an object over time is distinct from the temperature itself.

Second, it seems that one can be familiar with a function from possible worlds to sets of individuals, without being familiar with the property it is supposed to be. Take the property of being red. Intuitively, a colour-blind person may know what objects the function associated with redness selects in any possible world without knowing what redness is. This seems odd if there is nothing more to being a property than being a certain function. The colour-blind person can, after all, know all there is to know about such functions.

Third, if one identifies properties with functions from possible worlds to sets of individuals, then necessarily coextensive properties would be the same properties. This can be doubted. As Jonas Olson has recently argued, the property of being Hume’s dictum and the property of being the correct dictum about whether there are relations of necessary co-extension between distinct properties are not intuitively the same property (Olson 2014, p. 94). Being the correct dictum concerning this issue is an interesting property that Hume’s dictum would have if it were true. But being Hume’s dictum is not an interesting property of Hume’s dictum either way.

So I don't think it is correct to identify properties with functions. But unless relative properties like being delicious can be identified with functions from <world, standard-of- x > pairs to sets of individuals, it is doubtful that anything exists that meets the requirements on relative properties and therefore states of affairs.

Conclusion

I have argued that relativism about evaluative language faces some of the same difficulties as ethical non-naturalists. It seems to require the existence of irreducible evaluative states of affairs. Moreover, these states of affairs wax and wane depending on a judge. It is unclear why we should accept that such states of affairs exist, as they seem to lack (the right kind of) explanatory roles.

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