

Relativism I: Representational Content

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Abstract: In the pair of articles of which this is the first, I shall present a set of problems and philosophical proposals that have in recent years been associated with the term “relativism”. All these problems and proposals concern the question of how we should represent thought and speech about certain topics. The main issue here is whether we should model such mental states or linguistic acts as involving representational contents that are absolutely correct or incorrect, or whether, alternatively, their correctness should be thought of as varying with some (more or less surprising) factor.

In this, first, article, I shall discuss the general issue of relativism about representational content. I shall claim that there are legitimate ways of attributing contents that are absolute truth-bearers, and there are also equally legitimate ways of attributing relativistic representational contents.

In the companion piece “Relativism 2: Semantic Content”, I look in more detail at the more specific question whether semantic contents (i.e. the contents assigned to linguistic utterances in the semantics of natural language) should be construed in an absolutist or a relativist way.

1. Connecting traditional questions of relativism

According to Plato, Protagoras was concerned with the following question: when a wind feels cold to me (makes me shiver), and does not feel cold to you (does not make you shiver), is there one way the wind is in itself? Is it either cold or not cold independently of how it feels to anyone?¹ The question can be taken in several philosophically interesting ways. One is the question of whether there is an objective reality at all, that is independent of what appears to anyone or what anyone believes. Another question is whether appearances can ever be mistaken, i.e. whether there is a difference between appearance and reality. A figure whom we might call “radical subjectivist” claims that whatever seems to anyone to be so is in fact so for him or her. It might follow that error is impossible. Plato (in the *Theaetetus*) is only one of many who have examined the coherence of radical subjectivism. These two questions—the question whether there is an objective reality and the question whether appearances can mislead (or beliefs be mistaken) about reality—no doubt form part of what philosophers have been discussing under the heading “relativism”.

A third question arises independently of these two. Suppose we grant that there are ways the wind is in itself, i.e. the objective properties of the wind (for example, its speed, its temperature, its causal history and effects etc), and that these properties are independent of the way the wind seems to anyone.² Suppose we also grant that mistakes about whether the wind is cold are possible. For example, when I fail to bring a coat because I mistakenly think that the wind outside is not cold; or perhaps

¹ In his *Theaetetus* (152b), Plato uses the famous Protagoras quote (“Man is the measure of all things”) to introduce a discussion of this issue. What exactly Protagoras himself was interested in remains a matter of speculation, because the famous “Man-measure” quote is the only surviving bit of text from him about the matter.

² Plausibly there is dependence in the other direction: the way the wind seems to people would seem to depend on the objective properties of the wind, such as its speed, temperature etc.

the mistake I commit when I think the wind is cold because I have a fever and my perception is distorted. Then we can still ask: if I think the wind is cold, and you think it is not cold, might we both be judging correctly? Might we both be representing the wind correctly or be making correct judgements about the wind? This question is independent of radical doubts about objective reality and independent of radical doubts about the possibility of error.³ It is the type of question that has given rise to some of the recent debates concerning relativism, and which is the topic of the current essay.

2. Relativism and Absolutism

The issue concerns all types of mental and linguistic representation. Representation in general involves representing something *as* being some way. We can compare different representations as to the way they represent things: they can represent them in the same or different ways. Abstracting from such relations of similarity, we can speak of the “content” of a representation: representations that represent the same thing (or things) the same way have the same content.⁴ Thus, the content of a representation captures how it represents things as being.

All representations can be assessed as to whether they represent things as they are. I will be particularly interested in those types of representation, such as beliefs, assertions or perceptual experiences, which are regarded as *correct* if they represent things as they are.

An *absolutist* view of representation insists that the correctness or truth of a representation, depends entirely on its representational content and on how things are. For instance, consider beliefs with the content that a particular wind is cold. On the absolutist view, the correctness or otherwise of these beliefs depends *exclusively* on what the wind in question is like objectively. It does not depend, for example, on *who* has the belief, *how* one has it, *when* one has it or *where*. A *relativist* view of the matter will deny this. The relativist will say that objective reality by itself does not yet settle for every given content, whether representations with that content represent the world correctly. Thus, a relativist might allow that I have a belief with the content that the wind is cold, that you have a belief with the very same content—you believe of the same wind that it is cold—but that my belief is correct, while yours is not. Or, if we return to our first example, according to a relativist in this area it is possible that I believe that the wind is cold, you believe about the very same wind that it is not cold, but that nevertheless we both represent reality correctly. The absolutist will deny the

³ There may well be important connections between the three issues. In particular, some might be led to think that there is no objective reality (first issue) because they think that there is no objectively correct answer to *any* question (third issue). In this case, the position on the first issue that denies an objective reality, defends globally, what the corresponding position on the third issue defends only locally. The second issue *may* also be thought to be connected in that some may believe that the absence of an objective reality on some topic entails that no mistakes on this topic are possible. However, I know of no good argument why such an entailment should hold. Nevertheless, the perceived connection between the second issue and the other issue seems to be largely responsible for the bad reputation of relativism as the view according to which “anything goes”.

⁴ No doubt it is debatable whether all representation involves predication, or ascription of some property (or perhaps application of some concept) to some thing or things. I shall simply assume that representation involves representing something as being some way, that *which* way it represents *which* thing determines its representational content, and that the correctness of representations depends at least in part on this representational content.

possibility of both cases because she claims that the content of a representation alone determines whether it represents correctly.

Here and in what follows, I shall be using a general notion of *correctness* of representations, such as beliefs or judgements. I believe that my use is immediately comprehensible and reflects pre-theoretical usage. However, given that “correct” is used in many different senses, and that we are on well-worn philosophical territory, it will be safer to add a few explanations: “correct” as here used, is used to assess a thinker’s performance, for example in making a judgement or having a belief. When I assess a person’s judgement as correct, then this does not mean that it would be correct for me to make a judgement with the same content. Rather, I am assessing whether *that person* meets the norms to which *they* are subject qua users of the concepts involved, i.e. whether it is correct *for him or her* to make a judgement with this content.

For example, in a game of *Mastermind*, I might know that the winning combination does not contain green, because I myself set up the combination for my partner to guess. However, when my partner, who is trying to find out the combination, believes and says “the solution might contain green.”, there is a good sense in which I can assess my partner’s judgement as correct without myself judging that the solution might contain green (see figure 1). It is correct for my partner to judge that the solution might contain green just if the information available to my partner is compatible with the solution containing green (it would not, for example, have been correct for her to judge that the solution might contain *two* greens). I can acknowledge the correctness of her performance even when it would *not* be correct for *me* to make a judgement with the same content. One *could* construe the content of the belief assessed as correct in such a way that the correctness of your belief with that content entails that any belief with the same content must be correct (see, e.g., Dowell 2011), but this is not mandatory.

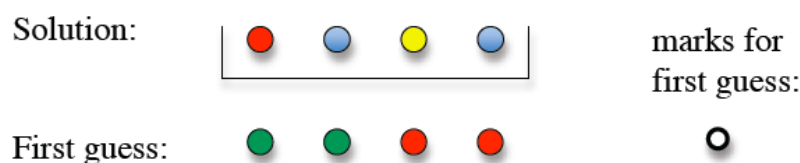


Figure 1

Another example: Sara teaches little Ben the correct employment of the concept of *pleasantness*. While lukewarm saltless cauliflower puree pleases Ben, it does not please Sara. Ben judges that such puree is pleasant. Sara can assess Ben’s judgement as *correct* in our current sense without being thereby herself committed to judging the puree to be pleasant. Similarly, if Ben judges the puree not to be pleasant (perhaps before trying), Sara might assess his judgement as *incorrect* in the current sense, even though she herself would (correctly) judge the puree not to be pleasant.⁵

⁵ A third example would be eavesdropping cases, see e.g. Egan 2007: when Bond and Leiter overhear Number 2 saying “Bond might be in Zürich.”, Leiter can assess the utterance in two different ways: he can assess how well Number 2 performed in employing the expressions and concepts he did, and he can assess the content of Number 2’s utterance. The notion of correctness I am here discussing concerns the first type of assessment: Number 2’s utterance is correct in this sense. By contrast, if

Thus, assessments of correctness (in the sense in question) are assessments as to whether the person assessed is performing well, i.e. in accordance with their competence with the concepts they are employing. It is a separate question whether there are respects of similarity among performances that guarantee the same correctness status, what these respects are, and whether representational contents should be abstractions from such a similarity relation.⁶

To summarize: *absolutism* about representational content is the view that the correctness of a given representation, such as a belief or an assertion, is always fully determined by the representation's content: two (actual) representations with the same representational content are either both correct or both incorrect. *Relativism* about representational content, by contrast, maintains that there could be representations with the same representational content (and occurring in the same possible world) of which some are correct and others are not. For the relativist claims that the correctness of representations sometimes depends not only on the content but also on who has the representation when, how or where.

3. Representational Content

Contents of representation (of belief, assertion, etc) are theoretical entities and might be construed in several different ways, some of them relativist, some absolutist. Let us consider four types of belief state that you and I might have in a particular situation *S* (where we are both naturally interpreted as talking about the same wind when saying "the wind"):

- (1+) The type of belief in me that would make sincere an utterance by me of "The wind is cold."
- (1-) The type of belief in me that would make sincere an utterance by me of "The wind is not cold."
- (2+) The type of belief in you that would make sincere an utterance by you of "The wind is cold."
- (2-) The type of belief in you that would make sincere an utterance by you of "The wind is not cold."

Let us assume, plausibly, that the absolutist and the relativist are agreed about which types of belief are picked out by the four labels and which of the four types of belief would be correct: namely that (1+) and (2-) would be correct, while (1-) and (2+) would be incorrect.⁷ Then the dispute between the absolutist and the relativist is a

Leiter is assessing, on his own behalf, the content that Bond might be in Zürich, he will have to assess it as incorrect, i.e. reject the content. Egan's impression that it would be inappropriate for Leiter to assess the utterance as true seems to be guided by the second type of assessment: to call an utterance, or what someone said, true is to endorse the content oneself.

⁶ See Kölbel 2013 for a discussion of this issue.

⁷ To be a little more precise: the scenario is one where I actually have a belief of type (1+) and you have a belief of type (2-), and where types (1-) and (2+) are not instantiated. (1-) and (2+) are supposed to be the (uninstantiated) belief types that would make the respective utterances sincere, where the facts about the wind and facts about our dispositions to experience the wind are unchanged from actuality. Moreover, the situation is not one which invites an "exocentric" interpretation of any of the potential utterances (see Lasersohn 2005, p. 670). Thus, for example, the situation is not one where the question at issue is why some third person, Peter, is putting on a warm coat, so that one would understand an

dispute about how to model these mental states in terms of their representational contents.

The absolutist adheres to the principle that two beliefs with the same representational content, i.e. two beliefs that represent the same world as being the same way, must either both represent the world correctly or both incorrectly. Representational contents are to represent reality correctly or incorrectly depending solely on what the represented aspects of reality are like. Hence, the absolutist concludes, (1+) and (2+) cannot represent reality in the same way, their representational content must differ. For otherwise it would be ruled out that the first is correct and the second is not—at least as long as we maintain that they concern the same reality.⁸ The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for (1-) and (2-). Both (1+) and (2+) *seem* to involve the ascription of coldness to the wind—apparently the same entity is represented as being the same way. So how could they differ as to correctness? The absolutist has for example the following two options. One is to say that (1+) and (2+), while being about the same entity (the wind), do not represent it in the same way. To flesh this out: the view might be, for example, that (1+) represents the wind as having the property of appearing cold to me, while (2+) represents it as appearing cold to you. Another is to say that (1+) and (2+), while both representing something as having the same feature, viz. coldness, they do not represent the same entity as having it. To flesh this out, the view might be that (1+) is a belief about my experience of the wind, while (2+) is a belief about your experience of the wind.

A relativist can preserve the appearance that the same entity is represented as having the same feature, coldness, in both cases, and she can allow (1+) and (2+) to represent the world in the same way, to have the same representational content (the same goes for (1-) and (2-)). According to the relativist, the way a belief represents reality as being is not always sufficient to determine whether the belief is correct. Whether it is correct for me to represent the wind as cold depends not just on the wind and the properties it objectively has, but it also depends on how things are (objectively) with me, for example how I am disposed to respond when exposed to the wind.⁹

A conciliatory view would have it that the relativist and the absolutist just employ different notions of representational content (and perhaps of representation), and that, as long as we are aware of the difference, there is no harm in using either or both. “Sameness of representational content” may be used to pick out similarity *in various different respects*. In other words, representational contents are always abstractions from some representation-relevant similarity relation. But several different similarity relations are relevant to representation, so we can introduce different notions of representational content depending on the respect of similarity that we are interested in. It is dogmatic to insist on there being only one correct respect of similarity that justifies speaking of “the same” representational content.

utterance of “the wind is cold.” in such a way that its correctness depends on how the wind feels to Peter. The idea is that relativist and absolutist can agree in their assessments as to which potential states are representationally correct and which are incorrect, even if they disagree on what the contents of these states are.

⁸ But see the end of §4 for some remarks about the view that they do not concern the same reality.

⁹ Going along with Plato’s description of the scenario, we might say: it is correct to believe this content for anyone whom the wind makes shiver (or whom it would make shiver, were they exposed to it under normal conditions), and not correct to believe it for anyone else.

Consider an analogy. Jim loves his wife. What does it take for Joe to do *the same*, i.e. what does it take for Joe to do *as* Jim does? That he love Jim's wife, or that he love his own wife? When Bob believes that he was born in New Jersey, what does it take for me to believe *the same*, what does it take for me to believe what he believes? Do I need to believe that I too was born in New Jersey, or do I need to believe that Bob was born in New Jersey?¹⁰ It seems that such questions are best resolved by clarifying which respects of similarity one is talking about in each case. However, in the cases we are interested in, this is not always easy to do.

4. Absolutism: representational correctness supervenes on representational content

What are the respects of similarity that the absolutist might be interested in? Clearly, the absolutist is interested in those aspects of representational states that are sufficient to determine their representational correctness. So she is interested in representational states that are similar to one another in such a way that necessarily, if one is correct (or incorrect) then so is the other. Thus the similarity relation captured by the absolutist's representational contents is a relation that at least preserves correctness status: sameness of content entails sameness of status as correct or incorrect. In other words, if we follow the absolutist's strategy, there can be no difference as to the correctness of two beliefs without a difference in the content of these beliefs--at least if these beliefs occur in the same possible world. One might express this by saying that the correctness of a belief supervenes on its content (or on its content and its possible world).

Whatever else the absolutist will say about the relevant relation of similarity, this constraint already guarantees that it marks out philosophically interesting equivalence classes. For it means that any two beliefs that are members of one such class (i.e. beliefs with the same content in the absolutist's sense) are "in the same boat": if one is correct (incorrect) then so is the other. If anyone believes one of these representational contents correctly, then whenever, wherever and by whomever the same content is believed, that belief will be representationally correct too.¹¹ The absolutist's strategy is to postulate representational contents that preserve correctness (at the same worlds). This construes representational contents as what one might metaphorically call "portable", in that these contents encode information in such a way that they can be taken from one location to another—in space and time, from believer to believer—without loss of correctness.¹² Portability is a desirable feature of

¹⁰ Cf Stalnaker 2008, p. 50.

¹¹ The idea of the supervenience of correctness on representational content concerns *representational* correctness only. Of course, the very same representational state can be assessed as correct or incorrect in a number of different ways. Thus, a belief might be representationally correct while being incorrect in some other way, e.g. unjustified, imprudent, impolite, etc.

¹² For the correctness status of an absolutist content to change, the objective facts would need to be different from what they actually are. In principle it is possible to extend the absolutist's strategy to include non-actual representations. Thus we might say that two beliefs must share the same correctness status if they have the same content, even if these two beliefs are beliefs in different possible worlds. The resulting conception of representational content would be similar to Jonathan Schaffer's "Necessitarianism" (see Schaffer 2012). Thus Necessitarianism is a limiting case of absolutism as defined here.

representational contents, as it makes it simple to model the storage and transmission of information.¹³

Another motivation that has been cited for an absolutist approach to representational content is the view that it is simply essential to the idea of representation that correctly functioning devices of representation cannot yield diverging representations if the object of representation is the same. Thus, Crispin Wright claims that

If two devices each function to produce representations, then if conditions are suitable and they function properly, they will produce divergent output if and only if presented with divergent input. (Wright 1992, p. 91, see also Wright 2008, pp. 170–1)

On this view of representation, if you represent the wind as cold and I represent the same wind as not cold, then the representations can't both be correct. In general, if one person represents reality to be a certain way while another represents it to be a different, incompatible way, then the representations can't both be correct. Conversely, if one thinker represents reality to be a certain way and another thinker represents it to be the same way, then it is impossible that one represents correctly while the other does not. This view entails that there cannot be such a thing as "perspectival representation", i.e. representation the correctness of which depends not only on the representational content but also on something else, such as the perspective (location, position) occupied by the thinker who is representing.

This view can be seen as originating in the influential idea that representational contents should be bearers of truth, in the sense that a difference in truth-value necessarily indicates a difference in representational content. Frege (e.g. 1918) makes such an assumption and this leads him to claim that the content ("thought") expressed by an indexical sentence on relevantly different occasions of use must be different. Many recent theorists follow this Fregean idea that the role of (absolute) truth-bearer is one of the constitutive roles of representational contents or propositions (see e.g. King 2007, Stanley 2007, Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009, Soames 2010 and Soames forthcoming). Following our conciliatory hypothesis, this just shows that these theorists are interested in modelling those representational properties of thought and language the sharing of which guarantees sameness of truth-value. To the extent, then, to which it is conceded in the Platonic example that my belief (1+) about the wind, that it is cold and your belief (2+) about the same wind that it is cold may differ in correctness status (and that truth requires correctness), they will not be treated by these theorists as being relevantly similar in the way they represent the world.

How should an absolutist then respond to the Platonic example? As already mentioned, she could deny that beliefs (1+) and (2+) have the same representational content: they either represent different objects as having the same property, or they represent the same object as having different properties. Thus, whatever interesting

¹³ Stalnaker's account of mental and linguistic representation is a paradigmatic example of this absolutist strategy (see, for example, Stalnaker 1984). According to Stalnaker, representational contents are sets of possibilities. To believe such a content is to locate the actual possibility in the set of possibilities that is that content. The belief is therefore correct just if the actual possibility is indeed a member of the content of that belief. Since there are only actual believers and the correctness of all beliefs therefore answers to the same possibility, Stalnaker's system complies with the absolutist's doctrine: the correctness of a belief is completely determined by that belief's content.

similarities there may be between (1+), my belief that the wind is cold, and (2+), your belief that the wind is cold, these similarities are not to be construed as “sameness of representational content”.

The only other option seems to be quite radical: to say that while (1+) and (2+) have the same content, they concern different realities: you and I inhabit different worlds, and if you believe things to be a certain way, then your belief is correct just if in *your* reality things are that way, while my belief is correct if in *my* reality things are that way. Thus, different people (people like you and me, who can interact causally) may end up inhabiting distinct worlds. This is the conclusion drawn by Iris Einheuser (2008, 2011). Einheuser mitigates the extravagance of this thesis by guaranteeing that the distinct worlds you and I inhabit at least share a common “substratum”.

5. Relativism: correctness does not supervene on representational content

We have seen some considerations that may motivate theorists to introduce an absolutist notion of representational content. What, if any, are the considerations in favour of operating with a relativistic notion, i.e. one that allows a variation in the correctness status of two beliefs despite their sameness of content?

Let us return to our example, my belief in situation *S* that the wind is cold, i.e. my belief (1+), and your belief (2+), that the wind is cold. The relativist we were considering wants to say that these two beliefs have the same content, the content of representing the wind as cold. But they are dissimilar with respect to correctness: my belief (1+) is correct, while your belief (2+) is incorrect. So: similarity *in which other respect* is captured by saying that they have the same content? Several respects come to mind. (i) Both beliefs represent the same entity as having the same feature (or perhaps: both beliefs involve application of the same concept to the same entity). (ii) Both are beliefs that can be correctly reported by saying that the believer believes the wind to be cold. (iii) Both are beliefs that are correct if and only if the wind makes the respective believer shiver, or perhaps would make her shiver under certain normal conditions (if we follow Plato’s scenario). (iv) The possessors of (1+) and (2+) are similar in that, given a desire to avoid shivering, both ipso facto have a motive to take measures they believe to prevent shivering (such as putting on a coat).

In other words, there are

- (i) similarities in reference, predication and concept application involved in these beliefs,
- (ii) similarities in the way these beliefs are reported,
- (iii) similarities in the conditions a believer must meet for it to be correct to have such a belief, and finally
- (iv) corresponding similarities in the further deliberative role of these beliefs.

Similarities of type (iii) and (iv) would also motivate treating the following beliefs as having the same content: your belief, in a certain situation *S*₂, that your own pants are on fire and my belief, also in *S*₂, that my own pants are on fire. To clarify: here I mean the sort of belief that each of us could sincerely and correctly express by saying “My pants are on fire.”. Such beliefs are often called “*de se* beliefs”. The condition that each of us must meet for the belief to be correct is the same (in one good sense):

we must have pants on that are on fire (similarity (iii)). We are also similar in way (iv): for example, if either of us wanted to avoid horrific injury, and thought that those with pants on fire can only avoid horrific injury by jumping into water, then this belief would motivate us to jump into water. Thus on account of these two similarities, we might want to consider the beliefs as sharing the same content.

However, in this case, we do not have the other two types of similarity: the two beliefs do not seem to predicate the same feature of (or apply the same concept to) the same object, for yours predicates the feature of *your* pants, while mine predicates it of *my* pants. Moreover, these beliefs would not normally be reported with the help of the same that-clause: you believe that your pants are on fire, while I believe that my pants are on fire. Only in special cases would the that-clause be the same. For example, if you report my belief and I report yours, we might both say “you believe that your pants are on fire”.

If we think that similarity of type (iii) and (iv) is interesting enough for us to speak of sameness of representational content here, then we would have another motivation to depart from absolutism. For clearly, your belief that your pants are on fire might be correct while my belief that mine are is not, or vice versa. So if, on the grounds of a (iii)/(iv)-type similarity, we treated them as sharing the same content, we would have a case where correctness is not fully determined by content.

Those who think that the correctness of representations should be determined by their contents might be unconvinced by these reasons and insist that we should therefore say that our beliefs have different contents. But this insistence on absolutism will not prevent absolutists from recognizing the similarities between our beliefs in some other way. Thus, Perry (1979) acknowledges that there is a difference between a belief I might naturally express by saying “My pants are on fire.” and a belief I might naturally express by saying “MK’s pants are on fire.”, but this is not a difference in *content* believed (as construed by Perry), but rather a difference in the *belief state* that has the content, i.e. a difference in the manner in which the content is believed. In line with Perry’s approach, one might also claim that my belief naturally expressed by “My pants are on fire.” and your belief naturally expressed by the same words, share some features: while these two beliefs have different contents, they are similar in that both attribute the same feature to the believer him or herself, thought of in a first-person way.

Thus we see the conciliatory hypothesis confirmed. Reserving talk of “having the same content” (or “differing in content”) for certain kinds of similarities (or differences) between representational states does not prevent a theorist from introducing other labels to mark out any other kind of similarity (or difference) he or she may be interested in.

However, absolutist representational contents can be viewed as a special case of the more general relativist contents (or perhaps more accurately: a subset of relativistic contents can do all explanatory work done by corresponding absolutist contents—see e.g. Lewis 1979 and Egan 2007). Thus, if a need can be established to find the theoretical resources to represent (iii) and (iv)-type similarities amongst beliefs (or corresponding differences), an argument might be made that a relativist theory of representational content is more unified: it does all the work absolutists can do plus more besides. Lewis 1979 puts forward such an argument. He argues that if we want the representational contents we are operating with to capture everything an absolutist notion of content captures but also the similarity between Hume and

Heimson, who both believe to be Hume, then we need to operate with relativistic “centered contents”. For Hume’s belief is correct, Heimson’s is not, yet they are similar in the sense of (iv), so should be said to have the same content.¹⁴ However, intertheoretical comparisons for virtues such as unification and explanatoriness are notoriously difficult and rarely conclusive. A champion of absolutist representational content faced with distinctions that cannot be made in terms of absolutist contents, and who concedes that these distinctions should be made, can always insist, Perry-style, that these are not differences in content.

Let me briefly mention three more examples of arguments that can be offered for allowing contents that do not meet the absolutist constraint of determining correctness (keeping in mind that even if these arguments are successful, they do not establish that it is wrong to operate *also* with an absolutist notion of representational content).

(1) Some argue that the content of perceptual experiences cannot be construed in an absolutist way (Bach 2007). Suppose I have a perceptual experience as of a pen in front of me. The experience might be veridical, in which case it is an experience *of* the pen in question. And the experience might be a hallucination, in which case there is no pen in front of me (e.g. when I am being deceived by some clever mechanism). Suppose we want to treat the veridical and the hallucinatory experience as sharing the same representational content. The only way to do this is evidently to allow representational contents that do not determine correctness. Bach construes these contents as “indexical” contents, i.e. contents that only count as correct (or incorrect) relative to some object of experience, so that a concrete experience does not count as correct (or incorrect) merely in virtue of its content, but in virtue of its content *and* standing in a certain causal relationship to some object of experience relative to which the content is correct (or incorrect). (This account allows perceptual contents to be suitably “particular” as opposed to “general”, which is the problem Bach is addressing. However, the need for non-absolutist contents is already established once it is accepted that of two experiences with the same content one is correct and one is incorrect.)

(2) Egan (2006) also argues that the representational contents of perceptual experiences should be construed relativistically. His reasons are different. Egan argues that relativistic representational contents provide the best defence of the view he calls “intentionalism”, i.e. the view that the phenomenal character of an experience supervenes on its representational content. Intentionalism seems *prima facie* incompatible with the alleged possibility of “spectrum inversion”, e.g. a case where the phenomenal character of Ernie’s experiences when he sees green things may be the same as the phenomenal character of Vert’s experiences when he sees red things and vice versa. Shoemaker (1994) has claimed that the possibility of spectrum inversion and intentionalism need not be incompatible if we take the representational content of our experiences to involve the attribution of “appearance properties”, e.g. the property of looking a certain way. Egan argues that the best way in which to construe these appearance properties is as so-called “centering features”, i.e. features the correctness of attributing which depends on the predicament of the attributor. Thus Egan claims that we should construe the representational content of perceptions as not determining correctness, i.e. as relativistic.¹⁵

¹⁴ Lewis’ conclusion, stated in this way, does not depend on internalism about content, nor does it beg any questions (as Cappelen & Dever suggest, p. 87–8, footnote 2).

¹⁵ For an excellent discussion of many issues surrounding perceptual content, including the present one, see Siegel 2013.

(3) Finally, a serious reason for wanting to introduce relativistic representational contents is given by the view that contingent matters in the future are not determined by the way things are in the present (see Belnap et al. 2001 and MacFarlane 2003, 2008). Suppose Michael believes (and hopes) that in 2020 there will be peace in Syria. This belief (hope) surely has a determinate content (change the example, if *peace* seems too vague). Evidently, the view that the correctness of a belief supervenes on its representational content is in conflict with these two assumptions: the assumption that Michael's belief has a determinate representational content and the assumption that Michael's belief is compatible with several future courses of events, some of which see peace in Syria in 2020, and some of which don't. If Michael's belief has a determinate content and the content of a belief determines its correctness status, then Michael's belief is evidently not compatible with those future courses of events that are at odds with the correctness status of his belief (whichever it may be).

Again, the absolutist has some options. She could simply deny that the future is genuinely open. Or she could deny that Michael's belief has a determinate content—perhaps the representational contents of beliefs regarding the contingent future only emerge gradually as and when the future takes its course. She might add, in line with the types of absolutist response we have seen previously, that Michael's belief, while not having a determinate absolutist content, does now have a determinate quasi-content that it will have had also from the perspective of 2020, whichever way things will have then turned out. On this view, then, Michael's belief has a determinate quasi-content, but quasi-contents do not determine correctness so this does not come into conflict with the openness of the future. However, it does not have a determinate content in the proper absolutist sense.

6. Relativism about Semantic Content: Rough Contours of the Issue

I have introduced representational contents as theoretical entities that may be used to track interesting respects of similarity amongst representational states, for example beliefs. Recent discussions about the suitability of absolutist or relativist contents have been conducted on a background of more specific (implicit or explicit) assumptions about the explanatory and theoretical purposes for which these representational contents are to serve. The role of a *semantic content* within a semantic theory for a natural language has been a central focus of these debates, and relativism is frequently thought of as a proposal specifically within semantics¹⁶.

The contours of the debate are *very roughly* the following. Most semanticists operate within a framework in which propositional semantic contents of some sort or other are assigned to sentences relative to “contexts of use”.¹⁷ The idea is usually that the content of a sentence at a context is (or determines) the content of an assertion that would be made by an utterance of the sentence made “in” that context. This content is also (or is related to) the content of a belief that could be sincerely expressed by such an utterance, and it is (or is related to) the content of a belief that a trusting hearer might acquire when witnessing the utterance. What is, *roughly*, under dispute is whether these semantic contents should be construed as entities that have absolute

¹⁶ See, for example, MacFarlane 2003, 2005a, 2011, 2014; Lasersohn 2005, 2008; Kölbel 2002, 2008a, Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherson 2005, Egan 2007, 2011; von Fintel & Gillies 2008; Recanati 2007; Stojanovic 2007, Stephenson 2007a&b, 2010; Glanzberg 2007, 2009, Dowell 2011. This is just a small sample of a growing literature.

¹⁷ NB: there are important exceptions, e.g. Davidson 1967, Bach 1994, 2001, Carston 2002.

truth-values, or whether they should be construed as entities that have truth-values only relative to some interesting factor. Thus, to use the earlier example, it may be debated whether the content a semantics assigns in situation *S* to the sentence “The wind is cold.” should be construed as having an absolute truth-value, given how things actually are, or whether the truth-value should be relative to, for example, a personal standard or perspective.

Moving on to a slightly less rough characterization of the issues, most semanticists use a *double-index* framework. In such a framework, a semantic theory assigns *intensions* to expressions at *contexts of use*. Intensions are meaning entities that have variable extensions: their extensions vary with some factor, call this a “point of evaluation”, such as a possible world or perhaps an *n*-tuple containing a possible world, a time and possibly other factors. In the simplest case, an intension simply *is* a function from points of evaluation to extensions. Thus, many semanticist will for example say that sentences in context express *propositions*, where propositions are entities that have extensions, i.e. truth-values, relative to points of evaluation. Intensions can be operated on by intensional operators, such as modal or temporal or doxastic operators. Examples of natural language expressions that might be construed as such operators would be, respectively, “possibly”, “sometimes” and “John believes that”. In addition, in double index semantics, the intension expressed by an expression may vary in regular ways from one context of use to another. For example, “I” and “you” are thought to vary in their intension (and therefore extension) from one context of use to another.

Thus, if someone addresses me and says “You are french.”, then the sentence at the context in which it was used expresses a sentence intension (a proposition) that is true at all possible worlds at which I, MK, am french. In this sentence, the expression “you” is regarded as context-sensitive, while the expression “are french” is regarded not as context-sensitive, but as having a variable intension: different people will be in the extension at different possible worlds. Thus, double-index semantics recognizes several different ways in which the extension of an expression can vary: context-dependence (as with “you”) and index-dependence (as with the contingent predicate “are french”¹⁸).

The debate about relativism about semantic content concerns the status of certain alleged forms of extensional variation: whether they should be treated as context-dependence, as index-dependence, or whether the alleged extensional variation should be rejected as merely apparent. Thus, to return to the earlier simple example, there are those who want to construe the meaning of “is cold.” in “The wind is cold.” as varying in intension (content) from one context of use to another (much like the predicate “feels cold to me.” would). This type of view is often called “contextualism”. Secondly, there are those who want to construe the intension (content) of “is cold.” as invariant from one context to another, but exhibiting index-dependence, i.e. varying in extension with a parameter included in the point of evaluation (perhaps a coldness standard, or simply a judge). This type of view is often

¹⁸ The alert reader will notice that the extension of “are french” varies not only with a possible world, but also with time. So a further question will arise as to whether this variability should be construed as context-dependence or as index-dependence. This is the issue debated between defenders of a traditional Priorian intensional treatment of tense (e.g. Kamp 1971, Kaplan 1977, Blackburn 1994 and the current mainstream approach as e.g. in Partee 1973, 1984 and King 2003).

labelled “relativism”.¹⁹ Finally, there are those who deny the relevant variability of extension altogether and claim that the predicate exhibits neither context-dependence nor index-dependence (except perhaps in the sense that the content expressed is contingent, i.e. varies in truth-value from one world to another). This last type of view may be called “absolutism”.

There are a number of areas where this debate arises, for example predicates of personal taste (e.g. “is tasty”), other evaluative language (e.g. aesthetically or morally evaluative), expressions expressing epistemic modality or probability, expressions used to attribute knowledge, and many more, including the phenomena of tense and modality.²⁰ A number of considerations have been brought to bear on the question of whether there is a real variation in extension, and on whether this variation should receive a contextualist or a relativist treatment. The sequel to this article will examine some of these considerations in more detail.

6. Conclusion

To summarise, absolutism about representational content is the traditional view that the correctness status (and a fortiori the truth-value) of a representation, such as a belief or assertion, is determined by the representation’s content. Relativism denies absolutism, i.e. claims that representations equal in representational content can nevertheless differ as to their correctness. We have seen a number of examples of contrasting views on representational content, including some motivations that can be adduced in favour of introducing absolutist or relativist notions of representational content. It was interests in different respects of similarity and difference amongst representations that motivated the different notions of content used by different theorists.

Up to this point we have not seen any reason to believe that there is anything beyond a mere verbal difference between the two approaches. For all we know they may be compatible, as long as we differentiate suitably between the different notions of content employed. Nevertheless, debates about the topic often present themselves as substantive disputes, with one party claiming that the other party cannot account for this or that phenomenon. The cases here discussed suggested that the impression of a substantive conflict is mistaken. However, there may well be competing accounts of representational content that are in genuine competition because they have the same theoretical objectives or aim at explanation of the same phenomena, so that one can compare the accounts with regard to their ability to account for these phenomena or to meet these objectives. The general issue between absolutists and relativists about representational contents takes on a more specific form in recent debates about “the” correct conception of semantic content. The sequel of this article (“Relativism 2: Semantic Content”) will explore this question in more depth.²¹

¹⁹ The terminology varies: what I have called “contextualism” is sometimes called “indexical contextualism”, and what I have called “relativism” is sometimes called “non-indexical contextualism (see MacFarlane 2005b).

²⁰ See e.g. DeRose 1992; Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson 2005; Egan 2007, 2011; Einheuser 2011, García-Carpintero & Kölbel (eds) 2008; Glanzberg 2007, 2009; Kölbel 2002, 2003; MacFarlane 2003, 2005b; Recanati 2007; Schaffer 2011; Wright 2008. Baghramian & Carter (forthcoming), Kölbel 2008b, 2012 and MacFarlane 2012 contain further references to this literature.

²¹ I would like to thank many people for comments on this work, in particular the philosophers at the Osnabrück University philosophy colloquium and the participants in the June 2014 meeting of the project *Semantic Content and Conversational Dynamics*, and two anonymous referees. Special thanks

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