

## Relativism, Realism, and Subjective Facts

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**Abstract:** Relativists make room for the possibility of “faultless disagreement” by positing the existence of *subjective propositions*, i.e. propositions true from some points of view and not others. We discuss whether the adoption of this position with respect to a certain domain of discourse is compatible with a realist attitude towards the matters arising in that domain. At first glance, the combination of relativism and realism leads to an unattractive metaphysical picture on which reality comprises incoherent facts. We will sketch the contours of a realist-relativist position called “subjectivism”, which avoids this result by giving up the assumption that the points of view of different subjects are all metaphysically “on a par”.

**Keywords:** Relativism, faultless disagreement, fragmentalism, multimundialism, subjectivism

### 1. Introduction

Suppose you and I have different opinions about licorice: I believe that it is tasty; you believe that it is not. What you believe is the opposite of what I believe. Yet, intuitively, we can *both* be right in holding the opinion we hold. A disagreement about the tastiness of licorice can be a “faultless disagreement” (Kölbel 2004). Relativists do justice to this intuition by saying that the truth-value of the proposition *that licorice is tasty* can vary across different subjects. On their account, *that licorice is tasty* may be true from my point of view and false from yours.

In recent years, relativism has become increasingly popular. However, several key questions about the metaphysical underpinnings of this view remain a matter of controversy.<sup>1</sup> The question we will focus on in this paper concerns the relationship between relativism and realism: if one adopts relativism for a given domain of discourse – be it taste, aesthetics, morality, or something entirely different – does one have to be, in some sense, *anti-realist* about the matters arising in that domain?

We think that many relativists will be tempted to answer this question in the positive. For example, relativism about taste is often associated with the slogan that there are “no evaluative

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<sup>1</sup> Recent discussions of the metaphysics of relativism include Beall (2006), Wright (2008), Einheuser (2008), Marconi (2014), Spencer (2014), and Jackson (2016).

facts” (Kölbel 2002: 19) or “no fact of the matter” about whether this or that food is tasty (Lasersohn (2005: 644); MacFarlane 2014: 3).<sup>2</sup> But while the combination of relativism and anti-realism may seem most natural, it is not entirely unproblematic.

Consider the relativist’s account of how you and I can have a faultless disagreement about licorice. That account assumes that one’s belief that *p* is correct if the proposition that *p* is true from one’s point of view. But if *p*’s being true from one’s point of view is compatible with there being “no fact of the matter” as to whether *p*, it is not entirely obvious why such principle should be accepted.<sup>3</sup> If there is no such thing as “the evaluative fact” that licorice is tasty, isn’t there something inappropriate in saying that my belief that licorice is tasty is *correct*, rather than neither correct nor incorrect, or flat-out incorrect? The content of my belief is that licorice *is* tasty. In what sense can I be *right* in endorsing that content if reality comprises no fact corresponding to it?

To be sure, there are several things an anti-realist could say in response to this worry. In what we have just said, we have been presupposing that some account is needed of the fact that I can correctly assert and believe the proposition *that licorice is tasty*. But if one is sympathetic to the view that facts about assertibility and believability should be used to explain the notion of relative truth, rather than being explained in terms of it (see MacFarlane 2014: 102–110), one may well find such presupposition unwarranted. We have also been presupposing that the categories of correctness and incorrectness can be unproblematically applied to judgments about the tastiness of licorice. But this presupposition, too, can be legitimately questioned – especially if one is attracted to the view that, even if these judgments have propositional content, their primary function is to *express* our inclinations and dispositions involving licorice, rather than to *report* worldly states of affairs.<sup>4</sup>

We are not going to review these responses here. What interests us is that they both involve commitments that do not seem to be immediately built into the relativist position, and that at least some of those who are attracted to relativism may be unwilling to take on. A relativist may want to be able to provide a substantive explanation of why we can be right in believing what we believe, even when the truth-value of what we believe varies across different subjects. And while there may be many affinities between relativism and expressivism,<sup>5</sup> at least some relativists may want to keep their view apart from it.

More in general, the project of developing relativism in a realist direction doesn’t seem to be one that we can or should rule out at the outset. What motivates relativists is, first and foremost,

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<sup>2</sup> Often, some form of anti-realism is implicitly built into the formulation of relativism itself – for instance through the claim that, if a proposition is true relative to some subjects and not others, it is *only* true in a relative fashion (Richard 2008: 9; Egan, Hawthorne et al. 2005: 158). See also Jackson (2016), who claims that truth-relativism is most naturally paired with an “unworldly metaphysics”.

<sup>3</sup> Here and in what follows, we are lax about the distinction between use and mention.

<sup>4</sup> Here we have in mind the kind of expressivism articulated in the work of Blackburn (1993) and Gibbard (1990; 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Kölbel notes that there is room for a relativist interpretation of Gibbard (Kölbel 2002: 213-214) and Schroeder has recently claimed that “expressivism is *relativism* done right” (Schroeder 2015: 25), meaning that it provides the best interpretation of the relativist formal semantics.

the idea that certain areas of discourse allow for faultless disagreement. Despite the widespread presumption to the contrary, it doesn't seem to be part of that idea, nor to immediately follow from it, that, where faultless disagreement is possible, the matter under discussion is somehow "vacuous", "unsubstantial", "unsettled" or that in any way falls short of the standards that something should satisfy in order to be considered "part of reality".

This paper offers advice to relativists about how to reconcile their view with realism. We will begin by presenting what we take to be the main challenge to such reconciliation – the need to avoid a view of reality on which this comprises incoherent facts (§ 2). We will then consider, and set aside, three possible responses to this challenge – each involving the denial of some widely accepted semantic or metaphysical principle (§ 3). Finally, we will present our preferred form of realist relativism (§ 4) and defend it from objections (§ 5). Building on an analogy with the "A-theory" of time, the view we will put forward avoids the threat of incoherent facts by giving up the assumption that the points of view of different subjects are all metaphysically on a par. We will not try to vindicate this position conclusively, but we will argue that it enjoys some advantages over its competitors and that, given certain commitments implicit in their position, relativists should in any case be attracted to it.

## 2. Relativism vs Realism

Terms like "relativism" and "realism" have been used in philosophy to refer to a variety of different positions. Let us begin by explaining how we will be using them in our discussion.

According to a familiar picture, *propositions* are the semantic contents, or meanings, of declarative sentences in context and the objects of belief and other propositional attitudes. The proposition *that Berlin is in Germany* is the semantic content, or meaning, of the sentence "Berlin is in Germany" and it is what one believes when one believes that Berlin is in Germany.

Classically, propositions are taken to be representational items that can be evaluated as true or false, i.e. as representing things accurately or inaccurately. This abstract characterization leaves several questions open. One question is whether the truth-value of a proposition varies under different possible circumstances or (as philosophers would put it) across different possible worlds. Contingentists say "yes"; necessitarians say "no". Another question is whether a proposition can have a truth-value at one time and a different truth-value at another time. Temporalists say "yes"; eternalists say "no".<sup>6</sup> *Relativism*, as we understand it here, is the view that, whether or not it varies across different worlds and different times, the truth-value of a proposition can vary across the points of view of different subjects. Thus, just as contingentists believe in the existence of contingent propositions (i.e. propositions true in some possible worlds and not others) and temporalists in the existence of temporal propositions (i.e. propositions true at some times and not

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<sup>6</sup> For the distinction between contingentists and necessitarians, see Schaffer (2012). For that between temporalists and eternalists, see Richard (1981).

others), relativists believe in the existence of *subjective propositions*, i.e. propositions true from some points of view and not others.

Here the term “point of view” is a placeholder for one’s favorite subjective factor – depending on the domain to which relativism is applied, this may be a taste, a perspective, an aesthetic or epistemic standard, etc. What matters is that points of view play a role that is structurally analogous to that of possible worlds and times: as a possible world (time) determines a truth-value for any contingent (temporal) proposition, so a point of view determines a truth-value for any subjective proposition.<sup>7</sup>

On the face of it, relativism nicely predicts a range of linguistic data concerning the production, acceptance, and rejection of claims in certain areas of discourse. Our opening example provides a good illustration of this. Arguably, a satisfactory semantics for statements about taste should explain why someone like me can correctly assert “licorice is tasty”, while someone like you can felicitously use expressions of linguistic denial (“no”, “nuh-uh”, etc.) and other disagreement markers (“that’s false”, “I disagree”, etc.). Relativism offers a neat and simple story. I can correctly assert “licorice is tasty” because the semantic content of that sentence – the proposition *that licorice is tasty* – is true from my point of view. Symmetrically, you can disagree, because, from your point of view, the proposition *that licorice is tasty* is false.

Admittedly, this is not the *whole* story about why you and I can be appropriately described as disagreeing. As has been repeatedly pointed out (see Stojanovic (2007: 696–699) and MacFarlane (2007)), the mere fact that the same contingent or temporal proposition is believed by X and disbelieved by Y does not, by itself, make for any *disagreement* between X and Y (just imagine that X and Y form their beliefs under different possible circumstances, or at different times). Still, insofar as the existence of a single proposition believed by one subject and disbelieved by another is a necessary (if insufficient) condition for the kind of disagreement one observes in these cases, it seems fair to say that relativism is better-placed to vindicate its satisfaction than other positions in this area – notably, contextualist views on which your belief and my belief involve different propositional contents.<sup>8</sup>

Our central concern in this paper is the compatibility of relativism about a certain domain of discourse with *realism* about the matters arising in that domain. There is, of course, a long standing debate in metaphysics about how realism should be defined. But, instead of entering that debate here, we will consider an argument to the effect that relativism and realism are incompatible, no matter how the latter is defined.

Consider the following principle:

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<sup>7</sup> For discussion of the analogy between worlds, times, and points of view, see Prior and Fine (1977). Our target is the relativity of *propositional* truth to subjective factors. In light of this, the distinction between “non-indexical contextualism” and “assessment relativism” (MacFarlane 2014), while important for other debates, is orthogonal to our purposes.

<sup>8</sup> For some contextualist replies to the challenge from disagreement, see López de Sa (2008), Sundell (2011), Huvenes (2012), and Silk (2016).

[*Minimal Realism*] For any subject X, if X believes that  $p$ , then X's belief that  $p$  is correct (if it is) at least in part because reality comprises the fact that  $p$ .

It may be thought that, in some form or another, any kind of realism should be capable of doing justice to this principle. For example, suppose I believe that Berlin is in Germany. It seems that, at a minimum, any form of realism about geographical matters should account for the correctness of my belief in terms of the fact that Berlin is Germany: if I am right in thinking that Berlin is in Germany, this is at least in part because reality comprises the fact that Berlin is in Germany.<sup>9</sup> We reckon that there may be other ways of capturing the same idea, some of which will involve no commitment to an ontology of facts nor to the metaphor of reality as some kind of receptacle comprising such facts.<sup>10</sup> But this way of speaking has the advantage of familiarity and can be used to bring out most clearly the conflict between relativism and realism.

Let us start by laying out the central commitment of the relativist position, using our initial example as a case of study. The relativist wants to say that you and I are equally right in holding the opinions we hold. Call this claim "Faultlessness":

[*Faultlessness*] My belief that licorice is tasty and your belief that licorice is not tasty are equally correct.

*Faultlessness* follows from the relativist's assumption that the proposition that licorice is tasty is true from my point of view and false from yours, together with

[*Relative correctness*] For any subject X, if X believes that  $p$ , then X's belief is correct if, and only if,  $p$  is true from X's point of view.

Now, our *Minimal Realism* demands that, when the belief that  $p$  is correct, this should be explained by saying that reality comprises the fact that  $p$ :

[*Realism*<sub>ME</sub>] My belief that licorice is tasty is correct at least in part because reality comprises the fact that licorice is tasty.

But *Faultlessness* says that your belief that licorice is tasty is just as correct as mine. So relativism should explain the correctness of your belief in the same fashion in which it explains the correctness of mine:

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this idea, and its connection to realism, see Wright (1992: 76-82). We say 'at least in part' because every realist should acknowledge that the correctness of a certain belief depends on its having the content it has, and not just on reality's comprising certain facts rather than others.

<sup>10</sup> One option would be to formulate *Minimal Realism* in terms of sentential grounding. For the notion of grounding and its relationship to debates about realism, see Fine (2001). For the distinction between sentential and predicative grounding, see Correia and Schnieder (2012).

[*Realism*<sub>YOU</sub>] Your belief that licorice is not tasty is correct at least in part because reality comprises the fact that licorice is not tasty.

And now we have a problem. For the simultaneous acceptance of *Realism*<sub>ME</sub> and *Realism*<sub>YOU</sub> appears to imply:

[*Incoherence*] Reality comprises both the fact that licorice is tasty and the fact that licorice is not tasty.

In brief, the combination of relativism and *Minimal Realism* seems to generate the unacceptable result that reality comprises mutually incoherent facts. Where do we go from here?

### 3. *Univocity, Unity and Coherence*

We want to distinguish and set aside three different ways of reacting to the simple argument we just sketched for the claim that realist relativism is committed to *Incoherence* (hereafter: the Argument from Incoherence).

One reaction corresponds to a position that Spencer (2014) calls “relationalism”. The relationalist is a relativist who thinks that, because of a certain “relativity in truth-making”, “different properties [can be] alethically relevant to the same proposition” (2014: 16) relative to different points of view. On our working example, these properties will be, for instance, *being tasty according to my standards* and *being tasty according to your standards*. The idea is that the correctness of my belief will be accounted for by the fact that licorice has the first property, while the correctness of your belief will be accounted for by the fact that licorice does not have the second property. So *Realism*<sub>ME</sub> and *Realism*<sub>YOU</sub> will be replaced by, respectively

[*Realism*<sub>ME</sub>\*] My belief that licorice is tasty is correct at least in part because reality comprises the fact that licorice is tasty according to my standards.

[*Realism*<sub>YOU</sub>\*] Your belief that licorice is not tasty is correct at least in part because reality comprises the fact that licorice is not tasty according to your standards.

Since the fact that licorice is tasty according to my standards is perfectly compatible with the fact that it is not tasty according to yours, relationalism avoids the threat of incoherent facts.

We want to set relationalism aside because we are interested in exploring a response to the Argument from Incoherence that retains what we regard as a natural principle concerning the connection between facts and propositions, namely:

[*Univocity*] If, from one point of view, a certain proposition is made true by the fact that  $p$ , then that proposition is made true by the fact that  $p$  from any point of view from which it is true.

Relationalists deny *Univocity*. They claim that my belief that licorice is tasty and your belief that licorice is not tasty are concerned with one and the same proposition, but they insist that that proposition is made true by different facts relative to different points of view.

This move is legitimate, but it also strikes us as problematic. If one and the same proposition can be made true by different facts relative to different points of view, one is left to wonder why the existence of a single proposition, believed by me and disbelieved by you, should even *begin* to count as a sign of disagreement between us. I believe that licorice is tasty, you believe that licorice is not tasty. But what the correctness of my belief requires from reality (relative to my point of view) is *not* incompatible with what your belief requires from reality (relative to your point of view). In what sense are we disagreeing then?

Note that our complaint is not that relationalism is equivalent to, or somehow collapses into, a form of contextualism according to which the sentence “licorice is tasty” expresses different propositions in different contexts. Spencer argues at length that the two positions should not be confused with one another (2014: 13–17). Our worry is that since relationalists ask us to interpret propositions in essentially the same way in which contextualists ask us to interpret context-sensitive sentences, their view makes it unclear why propositions should ever have come to be considered good candidates (or, indeed, better candidates than sentences) for the role of objects of agreement and disagreement. We shall return to this delicate point below (§ 5).

A second reaction to the Argument from Incoherence consists in questioning, not the formulation of *Realism*<sub>ME</sub> and *Realism*<sub>YOU</sub>, but rather the move from these two principles to *Incoherence*. It may be suggested that, even if the correctness of my belief that licorice is tasty requires the existence of the fact that licorice is tasty, and the correctness of your belief that licorice is not tasty requires the existence of the fact that licorice is not tasty, there need not be a *single* reality guaranteeing the joint satisfaction of these requirements. Suppose we allow ourselves to distinguish reality as it is from my point of view (“my reality”) and reality as it is from yours (“your reality”). Then all that follows from *Realism*<sub>ME</sub> and *Realism*<sub>YOU</sub> are, respectively:

[*Reality*<sub>ME</sub>] My reality comprises the fact that licorice is tasty.

[*Reality*<sub>YOU</sub>] Your reality comprises the fact that licorice is not tasty.

Since my reality and your reality are distinct, *Reality*<sub>ME</sub> and *Reality*<sub>YOU</sub> do not imply the existence of an incoherent reality.

This second reaction to the Argument from Incoherence may be associated with a variety of views advanced in recent years in this area, including Fine’s (2005) “external relativism”, Wright’s (2008) “truth-conferring model” of relativism, and Rovane’s (2012; 2013)

“multimundialism”.<sup>11</sup> While there are important differences among these views, they can all be seen as articulations of the *many-worlds* idea. To borrow Wright’s terminology, we abandon the notion “of a single, comprehensive Tractarian world – a totality of all facts” and we end up with different worlds, as reflected in different subjects’ points of view (Wright 2008: 173).

We want to put these views aside because we are interested in developing a response to the Argument from Incoherence that holds on to:

[*Unity*] Reality is one – there is a single, comprehensive totality of facts.

*Unity*, we think, is not just a piece of Wittgensteinian ideology – it is deeply ingrained in our pre-theoretic outlook on things. Moreover, there’s a risk that denying *Unity* might generate more problems than it solves. For example, suppose I am a multimundialist who thinks that licorice is tasty but acknowledges the existence of a reality that comprises the fact that licorice is not tasty. If I acknowledge the existence of that reality and of the fact it comprises, how can it be rational for me to refrain from believing that licorice is not tasty? As Ludwig points out, recognizing the existence of the fact that *p* without believing that *p* looks like a “breakdown of rationality” (Ludwig 2015: 183). On the other hand, if I don’t acknowledge the existence of that alternative reality and of the fact it comprises, how can I invoke *Reality*<sub>YOU</sub> as part of a story about why others can correctly believe that licorice is not tasty? We don’t want to suggest that multimundialists don’t have the resources to answer these questions – but a view that retains *Unity* might have the advantage of sidestepping them altogether.

The third reaction to the Argument from Incoherence that we would like to set aside consists in biting the bullet and embracing the conclusion of the argument. This involves endorsing the idea that reality – conceived of as the single overarching totality of what is the case – is constituted by the fact that licorice is tasty, but also by the fact that licorice is not tasty. In other words, instead of giving up *Univocity* or *Unity*, it is suggested that we give up

[*Coherence*] Reality does not comprise incoherent facts.

Philosophers who go down this route will have to either accept dialetheism – the view that there are true contradictions – or offer some account of why, even if reality is constituted by incoherent facts, this does not result in any exception to the law of non-contradiction. Recent discussions of “fragmentalism” (see, for instance, Fine (2005) and Lipman (2016)) may be seen as pursuing the second option.

A detailed discussion of these radical moves would take us too far afield, but we think it should be admitted that – other things being equal – a response to the Argument from Incoherence that didn’t require the acceptance of views as revisionary as dialetheism and fragmentalism would hold more interest than any response that does. What we propose to do in the next section is to

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<sup>11</sup> See, also, Beall’s (2006) “Relative Correspondence Truth” model, Einheuser’s (2008) “Factual Relativism”, and Spencer’s (2014) “Variabilism”.

outline a way of reconciling relativism and realism that preserves *Coherence*, and does so without renouncing *Univocity* and *Unity*.

#### 4. Subjectivism

Suppose I'm a realist relativist who believes that licorice is tasty. *Qua* realist, I take it that my belief is correct at least in part because reality comprises the evaluative fact that licorice is tasty. But *qua* relativist, I feel pressed to grant that your belief that licorice is not tasty is just as correct as mine. Can I avoid the conclusion that reality comprises two contradictory facts – the fact that licorice is tasty and the fact that it isn't? And if yes, can I do so without denying the “univocity” of propositions or the “unity” of reality?

In this and the next section, we will outline a metaphysical view that allows for a positive answer to both these questions. We will not try to offer a full-scale defense of this position, but we think that the foregoing discussion should provide some initial motivation for finding it worthy of future investigation. Further, we will argue that what may be seen as the main cost of our proposal is something which is already – even if only indirectly – built into the relativist outlook. If this is right, relativists of realist inclinations should take our proposal very seriously, and this quite independently of any theoretical advantages it might have over its competitors.

Our view resists the Argument from Incoherence by drawing a certain distinction between the correctness of my belief and the correctness of your belief – a distinction designed to allow me to retain

[*Realism*<sub>ME</sub>] My belief that licorice is tasty is correct at least in part because reality comprises the fact that licorice is tasty.

And reject

[*Realism*<sub>YOU</sub>] Your belief that licorice is not tasty is correct at least in part because reality comprises the fact that licorice is not tasty.

Remember that the correctness of both my and your belief is guaranteed by the truth of their content from our respective points of view – this much follows from *Relative Correctness*, which is part and parcel of the relativist package. So, any distinction between the correctness of my belief and the correctness of your belief that implies the retention of *Realism*<sub>ME</sub> and the rejection of *Realism*<sub>YOU</sub> must involve a distinction between our respective points of view. In particular, it must involve the idea that reality – conceived of as the single overarching totality of what is the case – is “aligned” with my point of view, and not with yours. This is tantamount to saying that the view we want to explore resists the Argument from Incoherence by denying:

[*Egalitarianism*] The points of view of different subjects are all “on a par”, in the sense that there is no point of view  $X$  such that reality comprises the fact that  $p$  if, and only if, the proposition that  $p$  is true relative to  $X$ .<sup>12</sup>

Instead, our view will assume

[*Privilegedness*] Of all points of view, my point of view is “privileged”, in the sense that reality comprises the fact that  $p$  if and only if the proposition that  $p$  is true from my point of view.

It is important to interpret this thesis in the right way. Our claim is not that every relativist should believe, of one of the two authors of this paper, that reality aligns with his or her point of view. Rather, we claim that every relativist should believe, *of him or herself*, that reality aligns with his or her own point of view. *Every* relativist’s slogan should be (in Wittgenstein’s own words) “The world is my world”.

The suggestion that the Argument from Incoherence should be resisted in this way may be initially met with surprise. For it may be thought that, in treating the beliefs involved in cases of faultless disagreement as equally correct, relativism rules out precisely the existence of a privileged standard settling what should count as the “fact of the matter” about the relevant bone of contention. The idea, as Kölbel writes, is that

[*Privilegedness*] is clearly not acceptable to the relativist. For if [there is a privileged standard] then the relativization to standards does nothing to help with the perceived lack of objectivity of matters of taste, and specifically with alleged cases of faultless disagreement. (Kölbel 2008: 248)

But there is reason to be unconvinced by this line of thought. Saying that only one’s opinions are supported by the facts does not immediately imply that the opinions of other subjects are incorrect. After all, correctness may be guaranteed by the facts in the case of one’s own beliefs, and by something else in the case of the beliefs of others. The challenge is just to provide a positive account of what that “something else” is.

We suggest that a relativist endorsing *Privilegedness* may tackle this challenge by reflecting on certain analogies between subjectivity, on the one hand, and modality and time, on the other. As we saw in § 2, relativism is structurally analogous to temporalism (the view that there are temporal propositions) and contingentism (the view that there are contingent propositions). Since “inegalitarian” versions of temporalism and contingentism are both familiar and well understood, a closer look at these parallels can provide a useful guide to reconciling

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<sup>12</sup> We borrow the term “Egalitarianism” from Hellie (2013). Fine (2005) calls a thesis closely related to Egalitarianism “Neutrality”.

*Privilegedness* with the possibility of faultless disagreement. For simplicity, we will focus on the temporal case.

Consider the view that, of all temporal propositions, all and only those that are true at the present time are made true by a corresponding fact:

[*Specialness*] Of all times, the present time is “special”, in the sense that reality comprises the fact that  $p$  if and only if the proposition that  $p$  is true at the present time.<sup>13</sup>

Not all temporalists endorse *Specialness*. But those who do face the challenge of explaining how past or future beliefs – whose content may or may not be true at the present time – can nonetheless be correct. To illustrate, consider Pompey’s belief, formed in 48 BC, that *Caesar is crossing the Rubicon*. Intuitively, that belief is just as correct as my present belief that Caesar is not crossing the Rubicon. But, if *Specialness* holds and reality comprises no fact corresponding to the proposition that *Caesar is crossing the Rubicon*, what makes Pompey’s belief correct?

One fairly straightforward answer to this question is:

[*Realism* PAST] Pompey’s belief that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon is correct at least in part because, in the past, reality comprised the fact that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon.

*Realism* PAST explains the correctness of Pompey’s belief in terms of a fact that reality comprised in 48 BC, but no longer comprises today – namely, the past fact that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon. This type of explanation presupposes a view – sometimes referred to as “tense realism” or the “A-theory of time” – according to which at least some facts are temporary rather than eternal – they can obtain (and, therefore, form part of reality) without obtaining at all times.

Note that, strictly speaking, if one explains the correctness of Pompey’s belief in terms of a fact that reality comprised in 48 BC but no longer comprises today, one is *not* explaining the correctness of Pompey’s belief in terms of reality’s comprising a corresponding fact. The question whether this kind of move constitutes a violation of *Minimal Realism* (see § 2 above) is one that we’ll take up in the next section. For the moment, the suggestion we want to put forward is that relativists who endorse *Privilegedness* might account for the correctness of other people’s beliefs by adopting a view that closely parallels the A-theory of time. More precisely, they could supplement *Privilegedness* with some principles along the lines of:

[*Realism* OTHER] Your belief that licorice is not tasty is correct at least in part because *otherpersonally* reality comprises the fact that licorice is not tasty.

Let us explain what we mean by the claim that “otherpersonally” reality comprises the fact that licorice is not tasty.

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<sup>13</sup> We borrow the term “Specialness” from Merlo (2013).

Suppose someone were to ask you what it means that, in the past, reality comprised the fact that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon. One thing you could say is the following: when we say that reality comprised that fact, we mean (very roughly) that, if we could somehow run time backwards, we would, at some point, be witness to the fact that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon. It is at least in part because we can picture the past obtaining of that fact in this way, that we take the way reality was (but, perhaps, no longer is) to explain the correctness of past beliefs. Pompey's belief strikes us as correct because we know that, if we could run time backwards up to 48 BC and place ourselves in the right epistemic circumstances, we would ourselves form the belief that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon, and be right in doing so.

Something different, but closely analogous, can be said about the notion of what is otherpersonally the case. To say that, otherpersonally, reality comprises a certain fact is to think that, if one could literally put oneself in the place of someone else, one would be witness to that fact. For example, to say that, otherpersonally, reality comprises the fact that licorice is tasty is to think that, if I could literally put myself in your place, I would be witness to the *fact* that licorice is not tasty.

“Otherpersonal” is a neologism of our own coining. But the metaphor of “putting oneself in the place of someone else” provides a good intuitive handle for this notion. In fact, understood in these terms, the notion of what is otherpersonally the case seems to us to capture the intuitive reasoning that lies behind our acceptance of the correctness of other people's beliefs about various subjective matters: if I can acknowledge the correctness of your belief *that licorice is tasty* while disagreeing with it, it is because I know that if I could put myself in your shoes – if I could *be* you, as it were – I could believe that licorice is tasty, and be right in doing so.<sup>14</sup>

Acceptance of *Realism*<sub>OTHER</sub> should be regarded as a substantive philosophical move. Just as *Realism*<sub>PAST</sub> presupposes a view on which at least some facts are temporary rather than eternal, *Realism*<sub>OTHER</sub> presupposes a view on which at least some facts are subjective rather than objective – they can obtain (and, therefore, form part of reality) without obtaining from all points of view. Following Merlo (2016), we shall call the latter view “subjectivism”.

Subjectivism differs from each of the three positions we presented and set aside in § 3. It differs from relationalism because it involves no denial of *Univocity*. It is compatible with holding that the proposition that licorice is tasty requires the obtaining of the fact that licorice is tasty from *every* point of view from which it is true. It also differs from any view involving the many-worlds idea. For that idea requires the denial of *Unity*, whereas subjectivism can retain the Tractarian picture of a single comprehensive world (a subjectivist will insist that we should take such world to be subjectively the way it is – but this no more requires a denial of *Unity* than the familiar view that the world is temporarily and contingently as it is). Finally, subjectivism does not imply any

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<sup>14</sup> We are aware that counterfactuals of the form “If I were in X's place, *p*” or “If I were X, *p*” admit of several readings, but we are confident that there is at least *one* reading on which our suggestion will not sound completely unnatural. Plausibly, our competence with so called “exocentric” uses of, e.g., taste vocabulary (Lasersohn 2005) is closely connected with our competence in evaluating such counterfactuals, on precisely the reading we are interested in.

form of dialetheism or fragmentalism. These views are designed to vindicate *Incoherence*, while subjectivism is designed to avoid it. Should relativists of realist inclinations take subjectivism seriously?

## 5. From Relativism to Subjectivism

We want to consider four objections to the idea that relativists should reconcile their view with realism by adopting subjectivism.

The first objection is that subjectivism does not really constitute an alternative to the positions we described and set aside in § 3. Consider what would happen if each of our readers were to endorse *Privilegedness*, as subjectivism recommends they should do. If there are subjective propositions true from the point of view of some of our readers and not others, and if such propositions satisfy *Univocity*, the fact that *Privilegedness* holds true from the point of *each* of our readers will result in the simultaneous obtaining of incompatible facts. Now, either a subjectivist accepts this result – in which case she will have to give up *Coherence* – or she avoids it by positing a distinct reality for each of our readers – in which case she will have to give up *Unity*.

Our response is that this objection ignores a key component of the subjectivist account, namely the difference between *Realism*<sub>ME</sub> and *Realism*<sub>OTHER</sub>. Suppose you come to believe – as you may correctly do – that licorice is not tasty. How shall the correctness of your belief be explained? Unsurprisingly, subjectivism does not support an *objectively* correct answer to this question. Since you endorse *Privilegedness*, you can explain the correctness of your belief in terms of the fact that licorice is not tasty (as per *Realism*<sub>ME</sub>). But *I* will explain things differently. I will say that your belief that licorice is not tasty is correct at least in part because *otherpersonally* reality comprises the fact that licorice is not tasty (as per *Realism*<sub>OTHER</sub>). Your explanation appeals to a fact; mine appeals to an otherpersonal fact. Importantly, though, *neither* your *nor* my explanation appeals to an incoherent reality or a multiplicity of disjoint realities. This marks a crucial difference from the accounts we examined in § 3. If subjectivism holds true, *Incoherence* and the many-world idea are theses that *no one* should or can correctly embrace. So subjectivism cannot be assimilated to fragmentalism, dialetheism, nor to any view committed to the many-world idea.

This takes us to the second objection. Consider again:

[*Minimal Realism*] For any subject X, if X believes that *p*, then X's belief that *p* is correct (if it is) at least in part because reality comprises the fact that *p*.

The subjectivist's use of the distinction between *Realism*<sub>ME</sub> and *Realism*<sub>OTHER</sub> would seem to involve a violation of this principle. *Minimal Realism* says that the correctness of *any* belief should be explained in terms of reality's comprising the corresponding fact, but the subjectivist offers this kind of explanation *only* in the case of her own beliefs. If pressed to offer a principle applying unrestrictedly to *all* beliefs, the closest thing to *Minimal Realism* that a subjectivist could offer is:

[*Minimal Realism\**] For any subject X, if X believes that *p*, then X's belief that *p* is correct (if it is) at least in part because *from X's point of view* reality comprises the fact that *p*.

The objection is that, since *Minimal Realism* is an essential component of any form of realism, the subjectivist's failure to accommodate this principle represents a failure to reconcile relativism and realism.

But careful consideration of other responses to the Argument from Incoherence suggests that the objection may be too quick. In § 3, we've seen that relationalists respond to that argument by invoking different relativized facts – the fact that licorice is tasty according to my standards and the fact that it isn't according to yours. This response involves replacing *Minimal Realism* with:

[*Minimal Realism\*\**] For any subject X, if X believes that *p*, then X's belief that *p* is correct (if it is) at least in part because reality comprises the fact that *p-according-to-X's-standards*.

Multimundialists, on the other hand, think that my belief that licorice is tasty and your belief that licorice is not tasty are made correct by facts belonging to distinct realities. Hence, their response to the Argument from Incoherence involves replacing *Minimal Realism* with:

[*Minimal Realism\*\*\**] For any subject X, if X believes that *p*, then X's belief that *p* is correct (if it is) at least in part because *X's reality* comprises the fact that *p*.

Now, we think it would be unfair to claim that, because of how *Minimal Realism\*\** and *Minimal Realism\*\*\** differ from *Minimal Realism*, relationalism and multimundialism fail to reconcile relativism and realism. *Minimal Realism* was meant to capture the general realist idea that our beliefs depend on reality for their correctness (or incorrectness). Far from involving any rejection of that idea, *Minimal Realism\*\** and *Minimal Realism\*\*\** can be seen as glossing it in ways that reflect the non-standard position adopted by relationalists and multimundialists concerning, respectively, the univocity of propositions and the unity of reality. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to *Minimal Realism\**. Once it is accepted that reality varies across the points of view of different subjects (as the subjectivist thinks) it is only natural to expect that the relationship between reality and our beliefs about reality will be sensitive to such variation – specifically, that whether a certain belief is correct will be a function of how reality is *from the point of view of the subject who has that belief*. This is not – we submit – a departure from realism, so much as a vindication of realism, recast in subjectivist terms.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> We've said that subjectivists need to replace *Minimal Realism* with *Minimal Realism\**. But some subjectivists may want to deny the replacement is even necessary: they may hold that, strictly speaking, other subjects don't believe anything and, therefore, don't provide a case where the antecedent of *Minimal Realism* is true and the consequent false. On this picture, one would not say that you believe the proposition

The third objection arises from the comparison between subjectivism and the A-theory. As we know, relativists are interested in capturing a certain notion of faultless disagreement. In § 3, relationalism was criticized for failing at exactly this task: if *Univocity* fails for the proposition that *p*, any appearance of disagreement between two subjects respectively affirming and denying that *p* would seem to vanish completely. But, on the subjectivist picture outlined in the last section, one's disagreement with someone believing that licorice is tasty turns out to be in some way analogous to one's "disagreement" with a past individual believing that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon. Since the latter is *not* a genuine case of disagreement, one may object that it's unclear why relativists should prefer subjectivism to relationalism.

We want to offer two remarks in reply. The first concerns the problem of distinguishing the "cross-personal" case (where there is a clear intuition of disagreement) from the "cross-temporal" one (where there is no such intuition). We agree that this problem needs a solution. However, as we already pointed out in § 2, we don't think that this problem is peculiar to our proposal. The task of explaining what disagreement consists in – and why the existence of a single proposition believed by X and disbelieved by Y is necessary but insufficient to ensure that X and Y are disagreeing – is one that every relativist faces. The fact that our view is no exception should hardly be held against it in a context where the focus is on how to reconcile relativism and realism, not on how to defend relativism itself.

The second remark concerns the suggestion that – with respect to vindicating the possibility of faultless disagreement – our view does not fare better than relationalism. We disagree with this suggestion. First of all, our main complaint with relationalism runs deeper than the suggestion presupposes. We think that rejecting *Univocity* – as relationalism requires – sits at odds with the very assumption that the presence of a single proposition believed by X and disbelieved by Y should be relevant to deciding whether or not X and Y are disagreeing. If propositions are as "ambiguous" as the denial of *Univocity* implies, that assumption – central to the traditional conception of propositions – seems strangely unmotivated.

Second, we feel that, on the relationalist picture of things (but not on the subjectivist one), cases of faultless disagreement will turn out to be too easily "dissolvable". For suppose relationalism is correct. Then all you and I need to do in order to dissolve our dispute about whether licorice is tasty is to leave propositions behind and focus on the underlying facts – those, according to relationalism, do *not* vary across our respective points of view, so they leave no room for faultless divergences of opinion. Not so on the subjectivist picture. If facts literally vary across our respective points of view, there is nothing we can do to avoid disagreeing. We can't frame our disputes in different terms – for example, by focusing on facts instead of propositions – and thereby find a common ground. If we want to dissolve our dispute, all we can do is stop having it. This seems to be exactly as it should intuitively be.

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that licorice is not tasty; instead, one would say that *otherpersonally* you believe that proposition. Accordingly, one would *supplement* (rather than replace) *Minimal Realism* with *Minimal Realism\**. See Hare (2009: 52-55) for discussion of this variant of subjectivism.

The fourth and last objection we would like to consider points to what may be seen as the major cost of the subjectivist response to the Argument from Incoherence – its inherent and uncompromising “inegalitarian” character. In discussing a view very similar to subjectivism (a view he calls “Firstpersonalism”), Kit Fine writes that “it seems quite bizarre to suppose that, from among all the individuals that there are, the subjective world-order [should be] somehow oriented towards me as opposed to anyone else” (Fine 2005: 313). What should be said in response to this complaint?

A full-blooded defence of subjectivism in the face of what might be called the “incredulous stare” falls beyond the scope of this paper. We could point out that this view is inegalitarian in a subtler (and, we think, less incredible) way than its critics seem to think.<sup>16</sup> We could also add that others have found this position attractive and have provided independent reasons for endorsing it.<sup>17</sup> But our aim here is not to show that subjectivism is true. All we want to argue is that *relativists* who have realist inclinations should embrace it in response to the Argument from Incoherence. In this connection, we think it is important to observe that relativists are already committed to a certain kind of “normative” inegalitarianism and that the step from there to the “metaphysical” inegalitarianism embodied in *Privilegedness* is a fairly natural one. Let us explain.

Suppose one introduces a notion of *trustworthiness* defined as follows: you are *trustworthy for me* if, and only if, I can treat the fact that a certain belief of yours is correct as a conclusive reason to believe what you believe. More generally,

[*Trustworthiness* DEF] For any proposition  $p$ , any subject  $S$  and any subject  $S'$ ,  $S$  is *trustworthy for*  $S'$  if and only if, whenever  $S$  believes that  $p$  and this belief is correct,  $S'$  can treat this fact as a conclusive reason to believe that  $p$ .

It is easy to see that, in a world without subjective propositions, all subjects would be equally trustworthy for one another. If you believe that Berlin is in Germany, the fact that your belief is correct can be a conclusive reason for me to believe that Berlin is in Germany. But if there are subjective propositions and *Relative Correctness* holds, things don't work so smoothly. The correctness of *your* belief that licorice is tasty cannot be a conclusive reason for *me* to believe that licorice is tasty, for nothing guarantees that the proposition *that licorice is tasty* has the same truth-value from our respective points of view. What I *can* do, of course, is to treat the correctness of *my* own belief that licorice is tasty as a conclusive reason to believe that licorice is tasty. Trivially, I am always trustworthy for myself.

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<sup>16</sup> One important observation concerns the kind of inegalitarianism implied by the subjectivist account. It is true that, if subjectivism holds, reality is “aligned” with my point of view, but since reality is not *objectively* the way it is, this does *not* mean that my point of view is *objectively* privileged.

<sup>17</sup> Hare (2009) argues that, unless we adopt a particular form of subjectivism called “egocentric presentism”, we cannot make rational sense of our moral inclination to favour conditions in which we (as opposed to anyone else) are better off. Hellie (2013) suggests that an inegalitarian stance towards personal perspectives is a central and ineliminable aspect of our understanding of consciousness. An application of subjectivism to the metaphysics of the mental is defended by one of us in Merlo (2016).

Now, sure enough, this is *not* subjectivism yet. The fact that one cannot regard anyone but oneself as trustworthy seems to capture a form of “normative” inegalitarianism – inegalitarianism about what one can do according to the norms of rationality. It is only in combination with *Privilegedness* that such normative inegalitarianism can be seen as the consequence of an underlying, metaphysical, inegalitarianism: one can trust oneself but not others *because* one’s point of view is, as a matter of fact, privileged *vis-à-vis* all others. What we are saying is that, even if it is not part of the standard relativist package, *Privilegedness* is not something that a relativist should find especially hard to believe, given the rest of her commitments. If no perspective other than one’s own is a reliable guide to what one can reasonably believe about reality, one could just as well – perhaps, even should – take one’s own perspective to be the only one that reflects how reality *is*, in and of itself. And that is exactly what *Privilegedness* says.

## 6. Conclusion

Let us conclude. It is customary to assume that the application of relativism to a certain domain of discourse is incompatible with a realist attitude towards the matters arising in that domain. In this paper, we challenged this assumption by advancing a realist version of relativism. After fleshing out and examining the chief challenge faced by any such combination – the risk of burdening reality with sets of mutually incoherent facts – we examined an alternative solution, subjectivism. The hallmark of this position is its “inegalitarian” character: subjectivists drop the assumption that the points of view of different subjects are all metaphysically “on a par”. We assessed the pros and cons of this move, and argued that subjectivism is a version of realist relativism worth developing, especially if one is interested in retaining a classical account of the relationship between propositions and facts and a Tractarian picture of reality as a single, comprehensive totality of facts.

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