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Parity, Faultlessness, and Relativism: A Response to Wright and Ferrari

Abstract: Crispin Wright and Filippo Ferrari have accused relativism of not accounting for “parity” – the idea that, when we argue over matters of taste, we take our opponents’ opinions to be “as good as ours” from our own, committed perspective. In this paper, I show that i) explaining parity has not been taken to be a desideratum by relativists and thus they cannot be accused of failing to fulfil a promise; ii) Wright’s and Ferrari’s reasons for claiming that parity should be a desideratum are unconvincing.

Key words: relativism, subjective terms, faultlessness, parity

“Relativism”, in the sense I use the term in this paper, refers to a set of semantic views about *subjective* terms (predicates of personal taste, aesthetic adjectives, moral terms, etc.) according to which they require a certain standard for their interpretation, provided by the context of assessment. There has been a strong reaction against relativism from authors with different semantic proclivities, some of them striving to show that the view falls short of delivering the goods it promises. For example, several authors have doubted that relativism can in fact account for faultless disagreement – a phenomenon taken to be one of its main advertising points.

The main issue I focus on in this paper is related to faultless disagreement, but interestingly different. The issue is *parity*: the idea that, when we enter a dispute about matters of taste, we adopt a “live and let live” attitude towards those with opposite beliefs *at the same time* at which we hold on to our own view. Crispin Wright (2012, 2021) and Filippo Ferrari (2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2020) have argued that relativism cannot account for parity. What should make this failure particularly uncomfortable for relativists is that they pride themselves for offering a superior account of faultless disagreement. Parity is considered by both Wright and Ferrari to be explanatorily prior to faultlessness and part of the folk notion of disagreement involving matters of taste; hence, even if the relativist offers a successful account of faultless disagreement, a deeper, more central phenomenon that lies at the heart of our practice involving such disputes remains unexplained.

In this paper, I tackle the issue raised by Wright and Ferrari. My aim is to show that the accusation that relativism cannot account for parity is unfounded because i) parity has not been an explanatory desideratum for relativism, and so any claim that it hasn’t kept its promise is unfair; ii) the arguments they offer that it *should* be such a desideratum don’t hold water.

1. Background: relativism, faultlessness, parity

According to relativism about subjective terms, the truth of utterances containing them is relative to *standards* – of taste, aesthetic, moral, etc., depending on the type of expression at stake. Relativism situates standards in the circumstances of evaluation (Kaplan’s 1989 term) or index (Lewis’s 1980 term) with respect to which utterances are evaluated for truth at/in a context. There are two broad versions of relativism that have been present in the literature. According to a more moderate one (Kölbel 2004b, Kompa 2005, Brogaard 2008 etc.; dubbed by MacFarlane 2009; 2014 “non-indexical relativism”), standards are provided by the context of utterance, alongside more orthodox parameters such as possible world, time, etc. According to a more radical version (MacFarlane 2009; 2014, Lasersohn 2005; 2016; simply called by MacFarlane “relativism”), standards are provided by the context of assessment – “a possible situation in which a use of a

sentence might be assessed” (MacFarlane 2014: 60). The second version of relativism is more radical than the first because, due to the relativisation to contexts of assessment in addition to contexts of utterance, both propositional and utterance truth are relative, not absolute.¹ Both versions of relativism contrast with contextualism (or “indexical contextualism”, in MacFarlane’s terms), for which standards are part of the semantic content of utterances and are contributed by the context of utterance.

The last couple of decades has witnessed a vigorous debate between these views, and one phenomenon that has been widely discussed in this connection is *faultless disagreement*. Although not everyone agrees that this phenomenon exists (e.g., Stojanovic 2007, Glanzberg 2007, Cappelen & Hawthorne 2009), most of the participants in this debate take it that at least in *some* cases of ordinary exchanges such as

Anne: Sushi is tasty.

Berit: No, it’s not. Sushi is disgusting,

an intuition that the interlocutors both disagree and are not at fault is present. Similar exchanges involving the other expressions mentioned above give rise to the same intuition (with its force possibly varying across domains) in the relevant cases. Relativism, it is contended, has a quick and easy explanation of the phenomenon, whereas other views – i.e., indexical contextualism – struggle.²

Theoretically, faultless disagreement has been characterized as follows:

A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker A, a thinker B, and a proposition (a content of judgment) p such that

- (a) A believes (judges) that p and B believes (judges) that not- p ;
- (b) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault). (Kölbel 2004a: 53-4)

This definition gives a good idea of the concept, but what does it mean to make a mistake/be at fault? One thing to note is that it involves an evaluation along some dimension, which in the case of beliefs is *truth*. Thus, to make a mistake/to be at fault means here to believe something that fails to be true. Faultlessness, then, is not believing (and, if the definition above is adapted to assertion, not asserting) something that fails to be true.

Faultlessness is the idea that neither party in a dispute (such as that between Anne and Berit, understood in the right way) is at fault in the sense just specified. Parity is similar, but with a twist. According to Wright, parity “is the requirement that faultlessness be appreciable, and endorsable, from the point of view not just of neutrals but of the committed parties in a dispute (...) [This feature] is meant to be implicated by faultlessness – conveyed in the acknowledgment that *your opinion is just as good as mine.*” (Wright 2012: 439, emphasis in the original). Parity, then, is not only taking others with whom we are in disagreement about an issue to not make a mistake/be at fault, but to do so *from within our own, committed perspective.*

¹ As a reviewer notes, there are other differences between the two relativist views: some relativists (e.g., Kölbel 2004b) have followed Kaplan in conceiving of context as an abstract n-tuple of elements; others (e.g., MacFarlane 2014) have followed Lewis, for whom it is a concrete situation in which a sentence is uttered. Such differences, although important for semantic theorizing, play no role in Wright and Ferrari’s argument from parity, nor in my replies to it.

² The main consideration against indexical contextualism is that it doesn’t yield the disagreement part of faultless disagreement. The main consideration against non-indexical contextualism is that it cannot explain *retraction* (MacFarlane 2014). Retraction will not be my focus in this paper.

2. *The problem for relativism*

Both Wright (2012, 2021) and Ferrari (2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2020) think that parity is problematic for relativism. Here is the problem, in a nutshell: relativism requires that we evaluate utterances for truth against a certain standard (usually our own), relative to which they are true or false. Utterances of sentences that contradict ours in a disagreement situation, while possibly true relative to other standards, are false relative to our own standard. Hence those uttering them are making a mistake/are at fault – as judged from within our own, committed perspective. So, when in debate and from within your own, committed perspective, you cannot say to your opponent that “your opinion is just as good as mine” because, from your own point of view, your opponent has made a mistake/is at fault. Their mistake/fault is that they believe something (according to your lights) false.

It is important to note that the problem posed by parity remains even if the relativist can account for faultlessness. The relativist’s explanation of faultlessness is simple: given that both interlocutors in the relevant disputes are saying something true relative to their own standards, neither of them is at fault (at fault *simpliciter*, as it were). But parity demands something stronger: that neither of them comes out as being at fault *from the other interlocutor’s committed perspective*. The reason this lack of explanation is problematic, Wright and Ferrari contend, is that parity is explanatorily prior to faultlessness. We have seen this already in the quote above from Wright (“[parity] is meant to be implicated by faultlessness”); Ferrari is even more explicit when he writes that “[o]ne might even argue that (...) the parity feature is explanatory prior to the faultlessness feature” (2016a: 83). And so, even if relativism easily accounts for faultlessness, a deeper and a more explanatorily fundamental phenomenon than faultlessness remains unaccounted for.

3. *Stances, faultlessness, and parity*

My reply to Wright’s and Ferrari’s case against relativism based on parity comes in two parts. First (this section), I point out that explaining parity hasn’t been a desideratum for a relativist theory of subjective terms and so any accusation of failing to provide an explanation of it is unfair. Second (next section), I consider Wright and Ferrari’s reasons for thinking that accounting for parity *should* be a desideratum for a relativist theory and show that they are not convincing.

One distinction found in early discussions surrounding relativism and subjective terms generally is that between adopting a committed perspective versus adopting an uncommitted one with respect to a specific issue (Lynch 1998). More recently, Lasersohn (2005) has picked up this distinction, which he later recasts in terms of “stances” (Lasersohn 2008, 2016). Thus, he distinguishes between various perspectives/stances one can take in using subjective terms: an *autocentric* one (when we take our own standard to be relevant), an *exocentric* one (when we take someone else’s standard to be relevant) and, most importantly, an *acentric* one, which is glossed as “adopt[ing] a ‘bird’s eye view’ (...) in which no particular [standard] serves as [the relevant one]” (Lasersohn 2005: 670). Such a distinction is entrenched in the literature on relativism and is one that both Wright and Ferrari already use (for example, when Wright talks about “the point of view (...) of neutrals” and that of “committed parties in a dispute” (2012: 439)).

Why is this distinction important in the present context? Because several authors in the debate have been clear that faultlessness is to be understood not from within a committed perspective/stance, but from an uncommitted/acentric one. Lasersohn thus writes that “it is only when we adopt an acentric stance that ‘faultless disagreement’ really seems faultless” (2009: 364). Conversely, for MacFarlane (2014) disagreements in which the parties are adopting their own, committed perspectives/stances are not faultless. This can also be taken to be the dialectical import of the eavesdropping cases first provided by Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherson (2005): the eavesdroppers are in disagreement with those they overhear only if they adopt their own,

committed perspectives.³ Other actors in the debate, with different semantic preferences, have seen matters in a similar vein. For example, in describing disagreement in matters of taste, Zakkou (2019) takes interlocutors to be felicitously saying things like “We are both right” and flags this phenomenon as “parity”. However, she claims that the interlocutors are felicitous in saying such things if they adopt a “distanced or neutral stance (where one abstracts away from one’s own taste preferences and looks at the exchange from a bird’s eye perspective)” (2019: 15). There is, thus, ample evidence that faultlessness is taken, both by relativists and their opponents, to involve an uncommitted/acentric perspective/stance, while disagreeing with someone and taking them to be faultless from within one’s committed perspective (that is, parity) has not been on the table – at least not on the relativist side. Faulting the relativists for not accounting for parity, as a desideratum they have set for themselves, is thus unjustified.⁴

4. Questioning the need to account for parity

Even if relativists themselves have not taken explaining parity as a desideratum, there might be reasons to do so. Wright and Ferrari offer what I distinguish to be three separate arguments in their writings, which I dub *The Explanatory Priority Argument*, *The Folk Conception of Disagreement Argument* and *The Reinterpretation Argument*. I present these arguments in turn below, showing why they are not dialectically efficacious.

4.1. The Explanatory Priority Argument

Let us start with what is most likely the stronger argument of the three, based on explanatory priority considerations. As we have already seen, both Wright and Ferrari claim that parity is explanatorily prior to, or conceptually more fundamental than, faultlessness (see section 2).

However, this claim is unfounded. While indeed parity could be taken to be explanatorily prior to faultlessness, no argument for that is given by the two authors. First, it is surely conceivable that one can take others to be faultless without taking them to be so from within one’s own, committed perspective (for example, from a “bird’s eye view” – see the previous section). Second, reversing the direction of the explanation seems as equally plausible as the direction Wright and Ferrari advocate for: our capacity to take others to be faultless from within our own, committed perspective might be founded on our capacity to take others to be faultless *simpliciter*. Third, another alternative is available, too: instead of thinking of the notion of faultlessness and that of parity as related in the way Wright and Ferrari suggest, they might be thought of as being on a par – perhaps as illustrating a more basic phenomenon, like taking someone to have made a mistake/be at fault; that is, as species of the same genus. No discussion of these alternatives is present in

³ A reviewer brings to my attention the distinction drawn by Kölbel (2015) between assessing a thinker’s performance as correct and assessing a content of a representation as correct as a way to mitigate Wright and Ferrari’s attack on relativism. This strategy has limited dialectical success in this context. Kölbel’s notion of correctness of a performance is based on one’s conceptual competence (“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” (Kölbel 2015: 40; for a similar distinction, see MacFarlane 2011: 148)). Wright and Ferrari could agree that there is such a sense of correctness, but what they are after is a sense in which what one interlocutor believes or asserts is *true* by the lights of the other interlocutor, when the latter takes on a committed perspective/stance. In other words, while Kölbel’s notion is an *epistemic* one, they focus on an *alethic* one.

⁴ Interestingly, a similar conclusion has been reached in a recent symposium on Baghramian and Coliva (2019), who point to a tension between what they take to be core claims of relativism that ultimately renders the view incoherent. They find “Equal Validity” (a notion similar to parity) particularly problematic. The unified response from card-carrying relativists such as MacFarlane (2022) and Pérez-Navarro (2022) has been that Equal Validity is, in fact, not a core claim of relativism. See also Kusch (2019) for an earlier reply to Baghramian along the same lines.

Wright's or Ferrari's work; absent that, it is hard to buy the claim that parity is explanatorily prior to faultlessness.⁵

Presumably, Ferrari aims to support the priority claim by appeal to intuition when he writes that “intuitions about parity are arguably explanatorily prior to intuitions about faultlessness: it is because disputants think that their opinions are roughly on a par that they think that the disagreement between them is faultless” (2020: 483). It is not clear whose intuitions Ferrari refers to, but as usually in philosophical debates, clash of opposite intuitions is very unlikely to lead to progress (not to mention the possibility of lacking such intuitions altogether when it comes to the two notions investigated). But perhaps the claim is more general, amounting to the idea that the folk embrace faultlessness because they, in fact, embrace parity first. If so, this is a substantive claim for which no support whatsoever has been offered (and, as the remarks below in section 4.2 about current experimental studies show, no such support can be easily found so far). Thus, if no convincing conceptual constraint has been unearthed to the effect that parity is explanatorily prior to faultlessness, and if no other evidence except the proponents' intuition can be brought to substantiate the claim that the folk think or behave like it is, then there is no reason to maintain that parity is explanatorily prior to faultlessness. But, if so, parity shouldn't play the central role assigned to it by Wright and Ferrari and it shouldn't be the basis of an argument against relativism (or any other view).

4.2. The Folk Conception of Disagreement Argument

Wright and Ferrari also hold that parity is part of the *folk* (or pre-theoretical) *conception* about what a dispute about matters of taste is. Here's the textual evidence (emphasis mine):

The folk philosophical thought is that disputes of inclination can manifest each of Contradiction, Faultlessness, Sustainability, and Parity. (Wright, 2012: 439)

The reason why we should care about parity is that it seems to be an important part of *our pre-theoretical conception of disputes about matters of taste*. (Ferrari, 2016a: 83)

Although both authors hedge their claims (Wright uses “can”, Ferrari “seems”), they take the idea of parity being part of the folk philosophical/pre-theoretical conception of disputes about matters of taste very seriously.

This is a strong claim regarding the beliefs of the folk. However, as far as I can tell, no evidence for this claim is given. I find it very doubtful that parity is part of our pre-theoretical conception of disputes about taste. It is not even clear that there is one such conception (or a coherent one) at all.⁶ If this last claim is true, then the issue of whether parity is part of it is moot.

⁵ On behalf of Wright and Ferrari, a reviewer offers the rejoinder that the relativist needs to accept the explanatory priority of parity due to the fact that, according to one of relativism's main tenets, we start with the concept of a particular perspective and build the concept of a “bird's eye view” from the comparison of a number of such particular perspectives. First, I find it doubtful that this claim is part of relativism's main tenets; at least, it is entirely possible to adopt a relativist view that doesn't take it to be so. Second and more importantly, it should be noted that this reply, while possibly on the right track, involves a substantial genealogical story about the formation of perspectives, and it is not clear whether Wright and Ferrari would subscribe to it. In any case, explaining how perspectives – and especially one that involves a “bird's eye view” – are formed should be the task of psychology/cognitive science, and not that of the philosopher; I thus admit that should results corroborating the genealogical story mentioned be available, they would complicate this reply to Wright and Ferrari's argument.

⁶ But see Wyatt (2022), who aims to implement a Canberra-Plan on disagreement about matters of taste, which starts from gathering platitudes about the target phenomenon. However, relevant for the point I'm making, neither faultlessness nor parity are among the platitudes Wyatt starts from.

And if such a conception does indeed exist, showing that parity is part of it is not trivial. But Wright and Ferrari seem to simply assume that parity is part of the relevant folk notion.

Experimental work might be able to help here. Extant studies, however, don't seem to consider parity, or at least they don't distinguish between faultlessness and parity when testing people's judgments. For example, the results of Cova and Pain's (2012) often cited study involving aesthetic and taste predicates show that the folk are not "normativists" about such matters, meaning that they hold that judgments in those areas are not correct or incorrect in an absolute and subject-invariant manner. The participants in the experiments were asked questions about scenarios featuring two utterances of contradictory sentences and their choices between the four answers provided were used to assign them a "normativism score". The answers they were asked to select are the following: "1. One of them is right and the other is not. 2. Both are right. 3. Both are wrong. 4. Neither is right or wrong. It makes no sense to speak in terms of correctness in this situation. Everyone is entitled to his own opinion." (2012: 345). However, the experiments leave it completely indeterminate whether the crucial notions involved in these answers ("right", "wrong", "correctness") are taken by the participants as pertaining to a committed perspective (as parity demands) or not. Other, more recent studies (Foushee & Srinivasan (2017), Solt (2018), etc.) exhibit a similar indeterminacy, and are thus unable to give support to Wright's and Ferrari's claims about the folk's adherence to parity. Of course, future experimental work might prove them right, but as things currently stand, no support for their thesis that parity is part of the folk notion of disagreement is to be gained from the current corpus of experimental studies.

Ferrari anticipates this reply. He thus writes: "[the relativist] has the option of denying that parity is part of the folk's conception of the normative significance of disagreement in [matters of] taste. But it would be helpful to have some argument in support of this denial." (2016b: 523). But this simply gets the burden of proof backwards: it is quite obvious that, since Wright and Ferrari are the ones making the (strong) claim that parity is part of the relevant folk conception, it is incumbent upon them to provide the support Ferrari takes to fall under the obligation of the relativist.

4.3. The Reinterpretation Argument

In addition to the two arguments presented, Ferrari (2016a, 2016c) puts forward what could be considered a third. He thinks that some of Richard's (2008) and Boghossian's (2011) arguments against relativism can be reinterpreted as involving parity rather than faultlessness (as they themselves have taken them). Thus, Ferrari focuses on an often-cited passage from Richard (2008: 132) to the effect that relativism doesn't yield faultlessness and claims that, interpreted as involving faultlessness, the argument is ineffective. However, interpreted instead as involving parity, the argument not only makes more sense, but becomes dialectically efficacious against relativism. Thus – the envisaged argument goes – by reinterpreting some arguments in the literature and strengthening them, one can, in fact, take parity to play a dialectical role in the debate.

Ferrari might indeed be right that interpreting Boghossian's and Richard's arguments as involving parity instead of faultlessness makes for a more efficient argument against relativism. However, the aim of their discussion was to show that relativism is objectionable based on the fact that it doesn't deliver something it has promised: namely, accounting to faultlessness. But crucially, since there is a significant difference between faultlessness and parity, strengthening their arguments by making them address parity doesn't have the same bite because the relativist has never promised to account for parity. Should there be other, independent considerations to the effect that the relativist should account for parity – perhaps some tacitly employed by Boghossian and Richard themselves – then Ferrari's interpretation of their arguments might add additional weight to these by increasing the coherence of the attack on relativism. However, even if this is so

(and, if my remarks in the previous sections are on the right track, it isn't), the work is done by those considerations, and not by Ferrari's reinterpretation. In other words, The Reinterpretation Argument is, *in itself*, useless against relativism.

Since none of the three arguments provided by Wright and Ferrari hold water, one cannot but conclude that, while relativism can be said to have many sins, failing to account for parity is not one of them.

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