

What Kind of Relativism is Right for You?

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1. *The Plan*

Four kinds of views, responsive to broadly the same sort of thought:

- There's something less than fully objective about this domain.
- But not in an error-theoretic way: It's not that we're systematically wrong about it.
- We're each by and large right about it, even though we think very different things about it. (Either interpersonally or diachronically.)
- How things are with respect to this domain, what you'd be correct to think or say about it, isn't the same across people or across times.

I am interested in getting clearer on

- (a) how the views work (especially the fragmentalist one and its metaphysically non-standard neighbors, which I struggle to get my head around), and
- (b) what you'd need to want from a theory of a domain in order to favor one rather than another of these kinds of views about it, and what kinds of phenomena you'd need to see in a domain in order to want those kinds of things from a theory of it.

My plan is to put the views on the table in a not-maximally-careful way, say some stuff about what I take to be their central distinguishing features, make some claims about the sorts of theoretical priorities for an account of a domain that might make the different views attractive, and then hope that other people have some stuff to say that will help me understand the theoretical landscape better.

2. *Threads of the thought(s) that there's something not fully objective about some domain D*

- Difference in content of perception (and/or belief), without error: Different subjects, or a subject a different times, can think/perceive very different things about D without either being mistaken.
- Incompatibility/exclusion of content of perception (and/or belief), without error: Different subjects, or a subject a different times, can think/perceive incompatible things about D, or can believe/perceive/say things about D that exclude each other, without either being mistaken.
- Linguistic difference and/or incompatibility without error: Different subjects, or a subject at different times, can say different/incompatible things about D, or make different/incompatible speech acts about D, without either being mistaken.
- Relative truth: What's true about D is (at least potentially) different for different subjects, or at different times.

- Subject-involvingness: The facts and/or properties that make up D are somehow subject-involving.
- Metaphysical depth: The difference between D and other, objective-looking subject matters, is something metaphysically deep and important. (So e.g. the properties or propositions of D are subject-involving, or relatively true, in a metaphysically interesting way that objective-looking properties and propositions aren't.)
- Cognitive depth: The difference between (thoughts/perceptions about) D and (those about) other, objective-looking subject matters, is something psychologically deep and important.
- Metaphysical second-class-ness: The facts and/or properties of D are metaphysically second-class compared to the facts and/or properties in objective-looking domains. They're less fully real, less a part of reality as it is in itself..
- (I'd be very surprised if this was exhaustive. What am I leaving out?)

3. Four different bits of theoretical apparatus to use to cash out "this stuff isn't fully objective"

First kind: Relationalism (e.g. Cohen on color, Harman and Dreier on ethics)

- The properties the subject matter trades in are relational, or more relational than you might have expected, or are constituted by relations to a kind of relatum you might not have expected.
 - (So e.g. the view that colors are constituted by relations to observer-types and circumstance-types, or maybe the view that shapes are relations to times. But not the relationality of *taller-than* or similarity.)
- A natural accompanying linguistic thesis: Contextualism
 - The predicates (etc) we use to talk about the subject matter are context-sensitive, and what varies across contexts is the extra relata our relationalist metaphysics introduces.
 - Note contextualism doesn't always go along with relationalism.
 - (Where it doesn't: should something like "surprising context-dependence" be promoted to its own spot on the menu of not-fully-objective views?)
- Consequences/features:
 - We get something subject-involving.
 - A kind of relativity: Get (potentially) surprising variation in TVs of sentences in context. (b/c contexts differ wrt value they provide for the surprising extra relatum.)
 - It's a straight-up metaphysical thesis, and the metaphysics is unproblematic.
 - Also delivers (and can be set up as) a thesis about content of perception and/or belief.

- Also goes naturally with a linguistic thesis, about the content of assertion etc.
 - It's easy to make it so that everybody's (by and large) right.
 - Also easy to make it so that everybody's not *automatically* right.
 - Doesn't deliver a metaphysically heavyweight sort of specialness/distinctiveness, or relative truth, or metaphysical second-class-ness – see Rosen's disposed-to-annoy-fox-terriers complaint.
 - On implementations that avoid error, we get each of us thinking different things about the domain, but not each of us thinking incompatible things about it.
- This kind of view will look good if: You want correctness & difference, don't care about incompatibility, don't care about metaphysical super-distinctiveness. (i.e., metaphysical distinction from the fox terrier properties.)
- Will look less good if you want a more serious-business sort of metaphysical distinction, a metaphysical difference in kind from other kinds of properties & subject matters that we aren't inclined to say subjectivist-y things about, or if you want a kind of metaphysical distinction that makes one kind of property or subject matter second-class in a metaphysically heavyweight way, or if you're uncomfortable with *surprisingness* of degree of relationality being the mark of the distinction between the fully objective and the less-than-fully-objective.

Second kind: MacFarlanian relativism

- Give a fancy semantics where the formalism is designed to deliver norms for assertion and retraction such that there are some assertions that are licensed by the assertion norm, but which the speaker is later obliged to retract.
 - The way you do it:
 - Give a semantics where your indices have got at least two moving parts in them.
 - Use that to define a notion of truth relative to a $\langle cu, ca \rangle$ pair where truth-relative-to- $\langle cu, ca \rangle$ depends (for your chosen subject matter) in an interesting way on ca .
 - (Because e.g. S is true relative to $\langle cu, ca \rangle$ iff $[[S]]_{cu, \langle w(cu), s(ca) \rangle} = 1$ - iff it's true relative to the pair of the context of utterance and an index built from the world of cu and the standard of taste of ca , for example.)
 - Then give a general recipe for mapping specifications of *truth at a context of utterance and a context of assessment* into norms for assertion and retraction, s.t. the general assertion norm is, *assert S in c only if S is true relative to $\langle c, c \rangle$* (true as uttered at c and assessed from c), and the general retraction norm is, *retract, in c_2 , an assertion of S made in c_1 , if S is false relative to $\langle c_1, c_2 \rangle$* (false as uttered in c_1 and assessed from c_2).
- Consequences/features:
 - Get something subject-involving. Truth as used at c and assessed from c^* can be different for assessors in different c^* s, and truth can depend on interesting and

surprising features of subjects and their contexts, and wrt which different subjects within a world, and/or at a time, can differ.

- It's a straight-up *linguistic* thesis.
 - Delivers - this is what it's built to do - a class of sentences with assertion and retraction norms such that it sometimes happen that you need to retract something that you were correct to assert.
 - Also delivers, with very little supplementation, a class of sentences with assertion, acceptance, and rejection norms such that I ought to reject an assertion you were correct to make, and Seth ought to accept an assertion that Tamina ought to reject.
- There's nothing special in the story about perception and/or belief - the relativistic contents can show up there, but the relativization won't do any work except insofar as there's retraction in the offing.
- There's no distinctive metaphysics. Or at least, no explicit distinctive metaphysics. That's not what the story's about.
- Will look good if what you think most centrally needs explanation is a particular pattern of linguistic retraction phenomena.
 - (Also easy to be almost-MacFarlane and motivate this kind of view on the basis of a particular pattern of acceptance/rejection phenomena.)
- Will look less good if what you want is something distinctive in the subject matter/properties at the level of metaphysics or philosophy of mind and perception – if you want cognitive and/or metaphysical depth. Also if you think the facts about retraction/rejection either don't fit the pattern the semantics is designed to deliver, or don't think that retraction/rejection data are a good basis for semantic theory choice.

Third kind: *De se* relativism

- Tell a fancy story about thought in the domain: It's got interesting *de se* content. (Thought in the domain is properly modeled in terms of self-attribution of properties, or belief-relations to centered-worlds propositions, rather than in terms of belief-relations to possible-worlds propositions.)
 - Probably also tell a fancy story about talk about the domain/subject matter: It's got interesting *de se* content too, and what that means is something about acceptance or uptake conditions, or conventional context-change effects: that e.g. sincere acceptance of "Vegemite is tasty" by an assessor requires self-attribution of e.g. *being disposed to enjoy the taste of Vegemite*.
- It's probably best thought of as primarily a thesis in the philosophy of mind (and perception). There's a natural accompanying thesis about language.
- It's also got some consequences for metaphysics: if you tell a *de se* relativist story about e.g. taste, you're not going to expect to find a property of *tastiness* among the furniture of the universe.
 - You're also not going to expect, when I correctly believe the CWP *that peanut butter is tastier than vegemite*, to find a truthmaker for my true belief.
 - At least: Not going to find a worldly SOA whose existence guarantees its truth. Because if you did, it'd guarantee its truth *simpliciter*, for everybody.

- You will find something about *me* such that in general x's being that way guarantees P's truth of x. But not going to find anything about the world such that w's being that way guarantees P's truth of w. (More to say here and I'm keen to try and thrash it out - I feel like I haven't got the formulations here right yet.)
 - This points at a potential serious-business difference in metaphysics - the subject matters that you go DSR about aren't in the business of characterizing reality in a metaphysically robust way in the way that subject matters you don't go DSR about are.
- Get potentially suprising variation of TVs (of beliefs, and sentences, and utterances) on the basis of potentially surprising features of subjects.
 - Get (like relationalism) possibility of cases where people think/perceive different things about a subject matter and they're both right.
 - Also – unlike relationalism - get the possibility that in these cases the different things they think are incompatible.
 - Will look good if you like *de se* content in phil mind & perception, and want a kind of subjectivity that's not just linguistic. Get subjectivity/relativity in phil mind, and also in metaphysics. Also if you want a view that's got metaphysical consequences without signing up for any fancy metaphysics. Going *de se*, you don't buy yourself any controversial commitments about what the world is like. The only controversial commitments you buy are about how we represent the world (generally, to make room for DSC at all, and specifically in the kinds of thought, talk, and/or perceptual experience you're theorizing about.) Also if the kind of metaphysical depth you want is a first-class/second-class, more-real/less-real, characterizing-objective-reality/characterizing-how-things-are-for-us kind.
 - Will look less good if you don't like *de se* content in Phil mind. Also if the kind of metaphysical upshot you want isn't of the first-class/second-class, objective-reality-characterizing/not kind. Also if you think the phenomena to be explained are fundamentally linguistic and we shouldn't sign up for controversial philosophy of mind or metaphysics.

Fourth kind: Fine/Rovane/Hare style aggressive metaphysics

- Reality's not of a single piece, or it's not the same from every standpoint
 - Very different implementations.
 - Hare has something like agential presentism or agential moving-spotlightism.
 - For Fine, there's the distinction between absolutism-denying relativist vs. the coherence-denying fragmentalist.
 - Rovane has a fragmentalist-ish view that divides up the fragments differently. Different fragments contain facts that aren't logically related to each other – neither consistent nor contradictory.
- Either what the facts are is time/person/etc relative, or different incompatible collections of facts glom together to form different fragments of reality (and different subjects,

thoughts, assertions, perceptions can be parts of different fragments, and therefore accompanied by different facts).

- Straight-up metaphysical thesis (theses)
- Gives a really deep, distinctive, kind of metaphysical specialness to the kinds of subject matters where you see this kind of relativism or fragmentation of reality.
- Also has some consequences for phil language – on at least some of these sorts of views, in order to get truth and falsity, and norms for assertion, to come out right, you want to keep track both of what's said by an utterance and of which fragment of reality the utterance is targeting/answerable to. (See Fine's distinction between *factual* and *focal* content.)
- Will look good if you want a really serious business, deep metaphysical account of the variation/relativity/non-objectivity in your target domain.
- Will look less good if you find the required picture of the structure of reality implausible/incoherent, or if you're just as happy with an account of the domain that relies on less-aggressive metaphysical assumptions.

4. Conclusion

- The thought that there's something less than fully objective about some domain is, I think a real one that's worth trying to cash out.
- But it's slippery, and it can be cashed out in different ways.
- We should be open to the possibility that there's not really a single unified phenomenon here, and that the thought(s) ought to be cashed out in different ways in different domains.
- This makes me worried, since I'm in print advocating for the same way of cashing out the thought across a lot of quite different-looking domains.