

The Inflexibility of Relative Truth

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Abstract: The ideology of relative truth is inflexible in two ways. Firstly, what's true-for-J is closed under entailment. This is a problem for using truth-relativism to solve the preface puzzle about knowledge. Secondly, truth-relativism cannot define a sense in which a question can have no acceptable answer. But that was Dummett's attractive idea about the sorites paradox. I propose an ideology that is not so rigid. It is preferable to relative truth.

1. Introduction.

Some questions don't have a single 'correct' answer. This thought has motivated relativism about truth. For example, take a question about what's delicious. I think that curry is delicious, and my Dad disagrees. He thinks curry is not delicious. I think his judgement on that matter is false. Yet intuitively there's a deeper sense in which he judges 'correctly', because curry does not taste good to him. It is not a serious metaphysical position that I have a privileged grasp on deliciousness, while my Dad is at odds with reality. The truth relativist captures this by holding that the proposition that <curry is delicious> is true-for-me, but false-for-my-Dad.

In this paper I point out two ways in which the ideology of relative truth is inflexible. In section 2 I note that what's true-for-J is closed under entailment. This is a

problem for using truth-relativism to solve the preface puzzle about knowledge. Section 3 suggests that vagueness gives rise to questions that have multiple ‘acceptable’ answers a fixed judge can give, and other questions with no ‘acceptable’ answer. Even if truth-relativism can capture the former, it can’t capture the latter. Section 4 proposes an ideology that is not rigid in those ways. It is preferable to relative truth.

2. Relative Truth and the Preface Puzzle.

John MacFarlane (2005) and Mark Richard (2004) have tried to solve the lottery puzzle about knowledge using relative truth. I will argue against such a strategy for solving the preface puzzle, which I set out in the manner of John Hawthorne 2004. Suppose it is July, and John has a list of the 100 people who have paid to be at his philosophy conference next February. He looks at his list, sees Ally’s name, and judges on that basis that Ally will be at the conference. *Prima facie*, we think that John then knows Ally will be there. John’s evidence that Ally will be there is the same as for anyone else on the list. And we are happy to say that John knows Betty will be at the conference, etc. But we give up these verdicts when we consider whether John knows that everyone on the list will be at the conference. Surely he can’t know that. It is very likely given his evidence that at least one person will get sick in February and have to cancel. The natural reaction is to change our minds, and say that John doesn’t know Ally will be at the conference, though it is very likely given his evidence. After all, we can’t in February report, “In July, it was likely given John’s evidence that someone would miss the conference; he already knew Ally wouldn’t.” Intuitively, the former claim is correct, and forces you to deny the latter.

This kind of reasoning generalizes. The puzzle is what to make of this. Does it show that our initial attributions are incorrect, and nobody knows anything? Or are our initial attributions correct, and we go wrong in reasoning to the view that the subject doesn't know? Is there a third way, according to which the initial attribution and the subsequent denial are both 'correct'?

I am interested in whether truth-relativism can capture the idea that both verdicts are correct. On this view, truth is relativised to a pair of a judge and a time. Suppose Polly is subjected to our example of the preface reasoning. Let 'Polly1' designate the pair of Polly and the initial time at which she judges that John does know Ally will be at the conference, and 'Polly2' designate the pair of Polly and the later time at which she judges that John doesn't know. Our truth-relativist holds that there is one proposition Polly changes her mind about, namely: <John knows that Ally will be at the conference>. The puzzle is dissolved because that proposition is true-for-Polly1 but false-for-Polly2. Both judgements are true relative to the judge-time pair at which they were made. That's the alleged sense in which both judgements are 'correct'. Being true-for-them is only a metaphysically serious sense of 'correct' if LINK is true.

(LINK) If p is true-for-J, then p is not completely at odds with reality.

For example, it can't be true-for-someone that I know what numbers will win next week's lottery. Call such a proposition 'malignant'. (Don't worry that LINK is vague; just worry about the uses I make of it below. I explain at the end of the section why the truth-relativist must accept LINK.)

There's a problem with this. The strategy is to endorse Polly's reasoning from the premise that John doesn't know everyone will be at the conference, to the conclusion that

he doesn't know Ally will be there. In reasoning in that kind of way, Polly commits herself to CK.

(CK) If S knows that P_1, \dots, P_n , and S is in a position to know that $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\}$ entails Q, then S is in a position to know that Q.

It would be incoherent of Polly to systematically accept any instance of the principle, but reject the generalization. It must always be 'correct' for her to accept CK, so CK is true-for-Polly1. I will now argue that this means it is true-for-Polly1 that John is in a position to know that no-one will get sick and miss the conference. But that's completely at odds with reality: John's evidence points to at least one person getting sick. So LINK is false.

Relative truth is closed under entailment. Otherwise, the thing we have relativised is not truth.

(CLOSED) Suppose P_1 is true-for-J, ..., P_n is true-for-J, and $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\}$ entails Q. Then Q is true-for-J.

Given CLOSED, the following argument is valid.

1. It is true-for-Polly1 that John knows that Ally will be at the conference.
2. It is true-for-Polly1 that John is in the same epistemic position with respect to everyone on his list.
3. It is true-for-Polly1 that John knows who is on the list.
4. CK is true-for-Polly1.

So,

5. It is true-for-Polly1 that John is in a position to know that no-one on his list will get sick and miss the conference.

Suppose for reductio that LINK is true. Then (roughly) 2 and 3 are true. (Assigning the relevant propositions a relative truth-value other than True, be it False or a third value such as Indeterminate, is completely at odds with reality.) So 5 is true. That's a reductio of LINK: that <John as in a position to know no-one will get sick in February> is completely at odds with reality. That proposition is 'malignant'.

This undermines the truth-relativist resolution of the puzzle. If a malignant proposition is true-for-J, then being true-for-J can't be what makes a judgement 'correct'. The truth-relativist account fails to explain how Polly's judgements are both 'correct'. Further, relative truth is an honorific. We lose any grasp of the notion if malignant propositions are true-for-me.

3. Vagueness: Permissiveness and Impermissiveness.

Truth-relativism is built to relativize the one correct answer to a judge. Can it capture the compelling thought that there are vague questions on which a fixed judge 'can go either way'? Suppose Quentin's car is half-way between paradigmatic red and paradigmatic orange. Then it is 'acceptable' for you to judge that it is red, and 'acceptable' for you to judge that it is not red. This 'permissiveness' intuition is stressed by Crispin Wright (1992 p. 144; forthcoming). Mark Richard (2004) takes it to motivate truth-relativism: judges can disagree about whether winning \$1,000,000 makes you rich for a New Yorker, but both their judgements are true-for-them.

What's the sense in which it is 'acceptable' for a judge J to go either way on whether p? It's not that both verdicts are true-for-J – a proposition and its negation can't both be true-for-J.

This truth-relativist thinks that whether [p is true-for-J] depends on whether J judges that p, and J's dispositions to judge on similar questions. So let's try to capture the permissiveness intuition using PERMISSION.

(PERMISSION) It is acceptable for J to judge that p iff [holding fixed everything apart from J's judgement on whether p (and J's related dispositions), it could have been true-for-J that p].

Grant for the sake of argument that PERMISSION is extensionally adequate.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this account of the intuition?

I see no strengths. We started with an intuition, featuring a notion of 'acceptable' judgement. Presumably, if a notion appears in an intuition, then it is intuitive. I see no gain from explaining the intuitive notion in terms of counterfactuals concerning the elusive concept of relative truth. Things are not clarified.

Here is a disadvantage of truth-relativism. Suppose we can say that a question has multiple acceptable answers. Then we should also be able to say that a question has no acceptable answers. Further, that's the attractive idea about the sorites paradox that Dummett tries to spell out in "Wang's Paradox". On this view, there is no acceptable, happy stance to take towards the paradox-forming propositions.

I see no way to express this idea using truth-relativism. For example, suppose that the assignment of relative truth is bivalent. Then it is true-for-everyone that there is a sharp cut-off in the sorites sequence. The truth-relativist must then accept that's the right response to the paradox. But we wanted to express the view that this response to the paradox is not acceptable, and neither are any of the others.

If the truth-relativist introduces a third truth-value, Indeterminate, they can say that it is Indeterminate-for-everyone whether there is a sharp cut-off in the sorites series. Presumably, the right response to the paradox is then to neither affirm nor deny that there is a cut-off. But we wanted to express the view that this stance is not acceptable either. And that view is attractive: the pull of saying there is no sharp cut-off, and the reductio of that claim, do not cancel each other out leaving us in a comfortable silence. They leave us most uncomfortable. Even multi-valent truth-relativism is expressively inadequate.

4. An Alternative Ideology.

Instead of relative truth, I propose that we take as our ideology the notion of ‘acceptable’ judgement that arose naturally in our discussion of vagueness. Let’s give it a label, to distinguish it from mere epistemic acceptability. The official ideology is: it is metaphysically acceptable at t for J to judge that p . It is metaphysically acceptable for you to judge that Quentin’s car is red, and metaphysically acceptable for you to judge that it is not red. Here’s how we capture the relativity of deliciousness, which allegedly motivates truth-relativism. Because curry tastes good to me, the only metaphysically acceptable attitude for me to have on the matter is that curry is delicious. It does not taste good to my Dad, so the only metaphysically acceptable attitude for him to have on the matter is that curry is not delicious.

(Like truth-relativism, this approach accounts for our use of ‘minimal’ notions of truth and falsity. The truth relativist says that \langle it is true that $p\rangle$ is true-for- J iff $\langle p\rangle$ is true-for- J . The approach I am suggesting says that the only metaphysically acceptable

stance is to treat [it is true that p] as equivalent to [p], and treat [it is false that p] as equivalent to [not-p].)

Let's see how this approach avoids the problems raised for truth-relativism, starting with the preface puzzle. On this view, it is metaphysically acceptable at t1 for Polly to judge that John knows Ally will be at the conference. It is not metaphysically acceptable at t1 for Polly to judge that John knows everyone will be at the conference. It is no longer metaphysically acceptable at t2 for Polly to judge that John knows Ally will be at the conference.¹

One might worry that this position is subject to an objection similar to that I made against truth-relativism, on the basis that acceptability is a kind of permissibility governed by standard deontic logic. The following argument is valid in standard deontic logic. Premise 2 is meant to gloss that Polly must treat knowledge as closed in the manner of CK. Premise 4 is meant to gloss that Polly must treat John as in the same epistemic position with respect to each person on his list. Asserting 1 but denying 5 is how my approach is meant to be preferable to truth-relativism.

1. At t1, Polly is required not to judge that <John is in a position to know everyone will be at the conference>.

¹ Deliciousness is completely subjective, because only facts about the judge determine whether it is acceptable for them to judge something delicious. The present account of the preface puzzle holds that knowledge is partly subjective: whether a knowledge-attribution is acceptable depends both on what's psychologically salient to the judge, and on the situation of the subject of the ascription. P is objective iff one of affirmation or denial is the only acceptable attitude for anyone to have towards p.

2. At t1, Polly is required not to: judge that <John knows S1 will be there>, judge that <John knows S2 will be there>, etc., and not judge that <John is in a position to know everyone will be there>.

So,

3. At t1, Polly is required not to: judge that <John knows S1 will be there>, judge that <John knows S2 will be there>, etc.
4. At t1, for all S1 and S2 on John's list, Polly is required not to: judge that <John knows S1 will be at the conference> and not judge that <John knows S2 will be there>.

So,

5. At t1, Polly is required not to: judge that <John knows Ally will be at the conference>.

I reply that premises 2 and 4 are false. At t1, Polly judges that <John knows Ally will be at the conference>, and does not judge that <John knows Betty will be at the conference>. But she is not violating the real requirement to treat John as in the same epistemic position with respect to each person on his list. What is forbidden is judging that <John knows Ally will be there> while denying or suspending judgement on whether <John knows Betty will be there>. Polly judges the former while ignoring the latter proposition, i.e. having no occurrent attitude towards it. Premises 2 and 4 have to be discarded in favour of 2* and 4*, which can't be used to argue from 1 to 5.

- 2*. At t1, Polly is required not to: judge that <John knows S1 will be there>, judge that <John knows S2 will be there>, etc., and deny or suspend on whether <John is in a position to know everyone will be there>.

4*. At t1, for all S1 and S2 on John's list, Polly is required not to: judge that <John knows S1 will be at the conference> and deny or suspend on whether <John knows S2 will be there>.

Turning to my second objection to truth-relativism, I suggest we get a better account of vagueness if we make the basic notion of our theory analogous to the following notion of intrinsically good action, which is not governed by standard deontic logic. Suppose Smith and Jones are retiring, and you need to buy them gifts. Smith is a great colleague – the intrinsically good thing to do is to give her a gift of at least \$50. Jones is lazy and bad-tempered – the intrinsically good thing to do is give her a gift of \$20. But it would be too unseemly, and so intrinsically bad, to give them gifts of different amounts. This is a minor moral dilemma – even the least bad options are still bad. Giving Smith \$50 is still intrinsically good, even if it is part of an overall strategy that is somewhat bad (e.g. giving Jones \$50 too). That's what I suggest we say about the possible attitudes to the propositions that form a sorites paradox. It is still intrinsically good to judge that the first member of the series is a heap, and intrinsically good to judge that last member is not a heap, even if they are part of an overall strategy that is deeply unhappy (e.g. not denying that there is a sharp cut-off for being a heap, not reasoning by reductio ad absurdum, etc.). As in a moral dilemma, some options are worse than others (e.g. believing in true contradictions), though any option is deeply unhappy.

5. Conclusion.

The ideology of relative truth is too rigid. It builds in too much structure. The ideology of metaphysically acceptable judgements has the necessary flexibility. Further,

it is closer to the motivating intuitions, which are naturally stated in terms of what it is 'right' or 'acceptable' to judge. I develop the resulting accounts of knowledge and vagueness elsewhere (my MS1 and MS2).

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