Max Kölbel

Objectivity, Relativism and Context Dependence

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Introduction to the Author

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1996–1998: Postdoctoral Fellow at Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City.

1999: Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Doctoral Programme in Cognitive Science, Universität Hamburg.

1999–2000: Lecturer in Philosophy (tenured), University of Wales Swansea.

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Publications (selection):

Books: *Truth without Objectivity*. London: Routledge 2002.

Relative Truth, co-edited with Manuel García-Carpintero, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008.

Arguing about Language, co-edited with Darragh Byrne, London: Routledge 2010.

Articles: Two Dogmas of Davidsonian Semantics. *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (Dec. 2001), pp. 613–35.

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Conversational Score, Assertion and Testimony. In Herman Cappelen and Jessica Brown (eds.), *New Essays on Assertion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

Learning Objectives of this Text

The primary aim of this text is to provide an accessible introduction to recent debates concerning two opposing positions which are typically called “relativism” and “contextualism”. Debates in this area are clearly related to perennial philosophical questions concerning objectivity and relativism. However, these recent debates are explicitly about the correct account of the “semantic content” of certain sentences. They are, therefore, debates in a specialized field, that of natural language semantics, and the central notion, *semantic content* is a technical notion in this field.

The present text is designed to achieve the primary aim (i.e. to introduce the uninitiated to this recent debate) by pursuing three objectives: first to explain how questions of natural language semantics engage with wider philosophical questions concerning the relationship between language, thought, societies and the world, secondly to explain the technical background needed to understand the recent debate, and thirdly to explain and contribute to the current debate. Chapter 2 is mostly dedicated to the first objective, while chapters 3 and 4 are mostly dedicated to the second. Chapters 5 and 6 serve the third objective.

The aim of this text is ambitious. One important reason for this is that it is not easy to provide an accessible introduction to natural language semantics that provides all the background needed to understand the current debate. The introductory material in chapters 3 and 4 therefore differs from standard introductions in the philosophy of language. It stresses foundational issues as well as phenomena of context dependence, while leaving aside traditional controversies on which introductions usually focus, e.g. debates regarding reference, the proper treatment of names or definite descriptions, etc. An attempt has been made to provide fully articulated formal semantic descriptions of various toy languages so that the reader is enabled to check for him or herself all the claims made about formal semantics. This means that these chapters are not easy and will require concentrated study, especially by those completely unfamiliar with semantics.

Another reason why this text is ambitious is that it tries to ground its introduction to the relativism debates on some fundamental considerations about the nature, purpose and empirical status of natural language semantics. This is itself a controversial area of debate.

A third reason why this text is ambitious is that it not only tries to introduce the reader to recent debates concerning relativism, it also attempts to make progress in these debates.

As a result readers will have to work hard to master this text. On the plus side, their efforts will be repaid not only by putting them into a position to adjudicate and take part in a cutting edge philosophical debate, but also by giving them a thorough introduction to natural language semantics, which will be useful in other areas of the philosophy of language.

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1. Introduction

On November 22nd 1963, John F. Kennedy was shot and killed. Was it Lee Harvey Oswald who shot him? Many believe that it was, and many believe it wasn't. If those who believe that Oswald did it are right, then those who think he didn't can't be right. And conversely, if those who think Oswald didn't do it are right, then those who think he did can't be. In other words: it's an *objective* question whether Oswald shot Kennedy. We may not know who is right, but we immediately recognize that, if one is right, the other can't be. In this sense it is an objective matter whether Oswald shot Kennedy. We share the same objective world and our beliefs are answerable for their correctness to that shared world. The world can be such that Oswald did shoot Kennedy or such that he didn't, but not both. We recognize this immediately and without further investigation because it is part of our competence as thinkers to recognize the objective status of a matter like this.

The issue of whether a question is objective should not be confused with the question of whether there is any good or conclusive way of establishing the answer, or whether anyone actually knows the answer. There may well be objective questions to which no-one knows the answer, or the answer of which cannot be established conclusively. What I mean, when I say that a question is objective, is just that it is a priori (i.e. can be known merely on the basis of conceptual competence) that if one person answers "yes", and this answer is correct, then anyone who answers "no" is wrong, and conversely: if anyone correctly answers "no", then anyone who answers "yes" is wrong). Whether anyone has good evidence for a given answer, is justified in giving a certain answer, or whether anyone knows the answer, is a separate question. Perhaps no-one ever knew or will ever know whether Oswald shot Kennedy (perhaps not even Oswald himself, if he suffered from amnesia or some other cognitive impairment at the time). Nevertheless, we are convinced that if anyone correctly believes that he did it, then anyone who believes that he didn't must be wrong.[1]

There are countless objective questions. For example the question whether Kennedy was shot, the question whether I left the lights on before I departed on my vacation, whether you are at this moment travelling on a train, whether Miró was born in Barcelona, or whether the first human in-

1 How can we be so sure of this? – We have been trained to use the concepts in question in this way, i.e. to put down any divergence of view on matters such as this (who shoots a gun when at whom etc) to some kind of mistake.

habitants of America came from Asia[2]. Examples abound. Objectivity seems to be an everyday phenomenon.

Nevertheless, quite a few people are sceptical of the idea of objectivity. Why? Perhaps the sceptics are impressed by widespread disagreements on certain subject matters, disagreements that are persistent and cannot easily be resolved by recourse to commonly accepted evidence. If there is widespread disagreement on some question, and the question is objective in the way described above, then there must be a large number of people whose beliefs are wrong. This means that those who believe the answer is “yes” will have to believe also that those who answer “no” are wrong, and vice versa. This may seem presumptious or feel uncomfortable. For example, consider disagreements on whether Olafur Eliasson is a good artist, or whether Barbie dolls are suitable toys for young children. In each case it might seem rash and presumptious to say that at least one side to the dispute must be wrong. Who is to say which side is wrong? In what does their mistake consist? And if there is such a mistake, why does the disagreement persist? Consider the question whether it can be morally permissible not to intervene when someone is attempting suicide, or whether German colonial ambitions were an underlying cause of WW1. Again, it seems unclear how the correct answer to these questions should be determined. So why say that one party is making a mistake? If we give up the idea that these questions are objective then we no longer need to say that at least one party to the dispute is in the wrong.

Different viewpoints, especially in politics, aesthetics, ethics or history seem not to leave room for objective standards. There seems to be no reason to assume that there is only one correct, objective standpoint. Our views seem to be the product of causal historical factors that influence and bias us, and these factors often do not seem to track an independently existing reality. Moreover, we can’t make ourselves free from these irrational influences. Our views seem coloured and biased from the start. So assuming that those disagreeing with us in these matters must be wrong would seem to be unwarranted.

In addition to questions of aesthetic or moral value, or of history, even science itself gives rise to doubts about objectivity. Experience shows that scientific experts can disagree (synchronically and diachronically), and Kuhn has claimed that the transition from one scientific paradigm to the next is not governed by rational considerations (Kuhn 1962). Thus it seems equally presumptious to say that scientific questions are objective.

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2 This example is taken from Boghossian 2006, which is an excellent discussion of contemporary scepticism about objectivity and knowledge.

Who is to say that in a scientific dispute at most one party can be right? Perhaps our theoretical beliefs depend so profoundly on accidental presuppositions that it would be rash to say that one framework must be wrong.

Robert Nozick (2001, p. 22) suggests a further explanation for scepticism about objectivity. Objective facts can be seen as constraining our freedom. For example, if it is an objective fact that lack of sleep causes tiredness in humans, then this limits our possibilities. It means that we cannot stay up indefinitely without getting tired. So Nozick conjectures that reluctance to accept objective facts may be explained by a desire that the facts were different. In this case, those who would like to stay up indefinitely without getting tired, might have a desire that it wasn't an objective fact that sleep deprivation caused tiredness. The flip side of this explanation, of course, is that objective facts can be seen to enable us to achieve our goals just as much as they can be seen to constrain us. Thus, the very same fact that lack of sleep causes tiredness may be felt as a relief by those who would like to get tired, or those who would like someone else to get tired at a certain point.

But I believe that Nozick's diagnosis points in the direction of a better motivation for scepticism about objectivity, one also mentioned by Nozick. This motivation, however, depends on a confusion between objectivity and unalterability. Many facts are the product of human activity and human social interactions. Thus, to take a banal example, the fact that most Spaniards have dinner later than 8.30 pm is an objective fact, but one that depends in many ways on the choices made by many people. If they chose differently then it wouldn't be a fact. To take a more momentous example, it is an objective fact that in most societies, people can acquire property rights over certain goods, a fact that has certain consequences for the options available to individuals, for example that they cannot just take an apple from a fruit stand without paying or having to deal with the threat of sanction. Such facts are "socially constructed" in the simple sense that they depend on a certain customs and social institutions, which ultimately depend on the choices made by individuals. We may very well lament some of these socially constructed facts, i.e. facts about how the individuals in some society interact. If we want to change the situation, we may very well come up against the prejudice that these facts are simply given and unalterable. Thus, someone who wants to abandon the institution of property, before they will even be able to make their case that abandonment is desirable, will come up against the view that property rights and duties are simply "an objective fact", that "that's just the way the world is". What this conservative view comes to is probably just that the institution of property is inevitable, and that it could not (or not feasibly) be abandoned by individuals making different choices. This is what the oppo-

nent of property will need to argue against. She will argue that property is socially constructed and is therefore not a fact that we just have to accept. Thus, what she needs to argue against is *not* that there is currently an institution of property and that this is an objective fact. What she needs to argue is simply that it is not necessary (and in a second step: that it is not desirable) that this institution should continue.

Nozick may well be right that it is opposition to established views or practices that often motivates scepticism about objectivity and objective facts in general. But as I pointed out, denying the existence of objective facts altogether is not needed to make the point that some practice depends on the decisions made by members of a society.

Exercise 1: *Read chapter 3 of Boghossian's Fear of Knowledge (2006). Essay question: "What does Boghossian mean by 'fact-constructivism', and do his 'three problems' show that fact constructivism is wrong?"*

Despite a certain sceptical tendencies, the vast majority of people will readily concede that at least some things are objective – who for example would deny that it is an objective matter whether Oswald shot Kennedy? Where the boundary between the objective and the non-objective lies, by contrast, is controversial. Thus, even those who admit in principle that there are some objective questions may diverge in their views as to whether, for example, moral questions are objective. Similarly, they may diverge on whether it is an objective matter whether some piece of music is aesthetically more valuable than another, or whether some dish is tasty. Whatever these controversial areas are, most people will agree that there is an unspectacular range of truths that are objective. At least this is so in our everyday experience. We assume, and our competence seems to require, that we regard the question of whether the Butler did it, or whether the lights are still on, or whether there are three chairs in the room, as objective. Even those with extreme metaphysical views, that reality is a construct etc, will still treat a range of matters as objective in that they will just assume, in an a priori manner, without empirical evidence, that either the butler did it or he didn't, and that if one person thinks that he did it, and another thinks that he didn't, then one of them is wrong. All except philosophical extremists will admit that it is an objective matter whether the lights are still on, or whether there are three chairs in the room, and even that in many cases we can easily establish the correct answer.

This does not mean that we shouldn't take these extremists seriously in philosophy. Their arguments may well be worth considering. Parmenides argued that there could only exist one thing, on the grounds that any other view was incoherent. His argument is one worth examining in detail. There is a place for these considerations. However, this text is not such a place.

In this text, we shall be starting from the assumption that there are several things. We shall be assuming that there are many things, that there are many objective truths concerning them, and that we can have knowledge of many of those. We will also assume that there may well be things we say and think that are not capable of objective truth, which may come as a relief for those who want to say that there is no such thing as objective history, objective facts about matters of taste, or objective moral requirements etc. We will be concerned with an account of our language and our thought that allows for both objective and non-objective areas of enquiry.

In forming views about the world, we are not alone. We rely heavily on what others tell us. This cognitive interdependence is deep. We acquire most of our views about the world from others. But it goes beyond merely receiving information from others via linguistic communication. For we also acquire our conceptual tools from others and hone them through mutual exchange of views. These conceptual tools are part of a human legacy that our predecessors pass on to us, that develops in our hands, and that passes on to new generations.

In pooling our cognitive resources, objectivity is a helpful assumption. If we know that a question is objective then we know that if another thinker correctly answers the question then it will also be correct for us to answer the question in this way. We can make use of others' answers, thus saving ourselves the efforts they made in arriving at their answer– assuming, of course, that their efforts were well-directed, that they used good methods and made no mistakes in doing so. Conversely, the assumption of objectivity puts constraints on the methods regarded as appropriate for forming beliefs: the correct methods must be such that anyone employing them correctly will arrive at the same answer, i.e. that arriving at divergent answers is a symptom of some mistake which will prompt a search for the location of the mistake so that it can be avoided. If, despite a divergence of answers, no mistake in the application of the method can be found, then this motivates a revision of the method, or perhaps motivates us to re-think the status of the subject matter as objective. Such corrective interplay helps hone our conceptual apparatus.

If this picture of our cognitive interaction with others and the world is right, then it makes sense for our conceptual and linguistic tools to allow objective as well as non-objective subject matters. Language is the primary medium with which we conduct our cognitive interactions. We use language to convey information, language learning is the principal conduit by which we mutually calibrate our conceptual repertoires. So an account of linguistic communication that makes room for communication about objective as well as non-objective matters is needed. This text attempts to outline an account of linguistic meaning that meets this requirement. That is, it tries

to show how a semantic theory of a natural language (i.e. a theory that describes the meanings of the expressions of that language) can make room for objectivity as well as non-objectivity.

There is a certain general theoretical framework or paradigm within which much semantic theorising has been and is being carried out. The notion of a “proposition”, “propositional content” or “semantic content” plays a central role in this framework: the main meaning property of a sentence type[3] consists in it expressing such a semantic content. These propositions or semantic contents are bearers of truth-values, and one central idea of the framework is that the proposition expressed by (an utterance of) a sentence allows us to make certain predictions about the correctness or incorrectness of the utterance. Some versions of the framework hope to do without propositions or contents, so they try to arrive at these predictions by merely specifying the conditions under which (an utterance of) the sentence is true. However, I shall mostly be addressing the standard version which does allow propositional contents. Usually, propositions are thought to function not just as the contents of sentences or utterances, but also as the contents of thoughts and linguistic acts. Thus, the content of an utterance of the sentence is also the potential content of thought, for example the content of a belief or of a desire; as well as the content of an assertion or of a command. For example, if in uttering the sentence “Sam smokes.” I express a proposition, the proposition that Sam smokes, I might also be asserting that proposition and – if my assertion is sincere – express a belief with that content.

As it turns out, the way a semantic theory deals with communication concerning non-objective questions depends on the kind of propositions it postulates as the contents of utterances. Much of this text is devoted to teasing out various different ways in which non-objective discourse can or should be treated, and what role various different notions of propositional content would play in such an account.

The next chapter, therefore, deals in a general way with the idea of propositional contents as abstract entities that can be employed to characterize language and thought. It tries to justify this way of theorizing. Chapter 3 then explains the rationale behind the typical form most semantic theorising takes, namely the form of a definition of a semantic truth-predicate, and rehearses some of the considerations that have led theorists from an extensional to an intensional version of this approach. Many sentences of natural languages depend for their correctness on the context in which they are used. Chapter 4 explains a standard framework for incorporating

3 I.e. a string of repeatable signs of which many instances or tokens can be produced.

context dependence into the semantics of a language, namely a framework roughly along the lines of Kaplan's "Demonstratives" (1977).

Up to that point, the material expounded is fairly well-known, even though I am perhaps putting a different stress on certain matters. In Chapter 5, we finally move into an area of recent controversy, namely the proper treatment of certain types of context-sensitivity. I shall be advocating the coherence of what has recently been called a "relativist semantics", i.e. a semantics that postulates propositional contents whose truth-value varies with non-standard parameters. However, I shall also be considering competing approaches, of which some will stand up well to my critical examination.

Chapter 6 enters into a discussion of the coherence of "relativist" semantics that takes its starting point from Gareth Evans' critique of tense logic (Evans 1985). This will also be the place where I consider whether forms of relativism that have been called "radical" can be motivated and are coherent.

Finally, in chapter 7, I draw some conclusions from the forgoing discussions.