CRITICAL STUDY

Relativism and Monadic Truth. By H. CAPPELEN AND J. HAWTHORNE. (Oxford UP, 2009, Pp. viii + 148, Price £28.00 (hardcover), £15 (paperback).)

In the past ten years, work by Kölbel, MacFarlane, Richard and others has rekindled old debates on relativism. In this important contribution to those debates, the authors defend a 'mainstream' view about the contents of thought and talk that they call *Simplicity* against the assaults from such 'analytic relativists'. C&H's *Simplicity* consists in the following five theses:

T1 There are propositions and they instantiate the fundamental monadic properties of truth *simpliciter* and falsity *simpliciter*.

T2 The semantic values of declarative sentences relative to contexts of utterance are propositions.

T3 Propositions are, unsurprisingly, the objects of propositional attitudes, such as belief, hope, wish, doubt, etc.

T4 Propositions are the objects of illocutionary acts; they are, e.g., what we assert and deny.

T5 Propositions are the objects of agreement and disagreement.

As MacFarlane points out in a recent symposium on this book in *Philosophical Studies,* 156 (2011, pp. 417–66), given this way of presenting the debate it centres on (T1), with a heavy emphasis on 'fundamental'. If propositions yield a truth-value given just a full specification of a way the world might be, then many contemporary semanticists would reject T2 for reasons that have nothing to do with the motivations for relativism: their main consideration would be that an adequately compositional account of natural languages will not ascribe propositions thus understood as semantic values to many sentences, but at most 'propositional functions' or 'propositional skeletons' to be fully specified in context on the basis of non-properly-semantic facts. Somewhat reluctantly, C&H grant as much (3, pp. 24–5). Some relativists also accept T3–T5 (with their own idiosyncratic qualifications, of course). Finally, some relativists (Richard and MacFarlane, among others) explicitly contemplate a monadic disquotational object-language truth-predicate; so they might disagree with T1 only if some weight is placed on 'fundamental' and some elucidation offered – something which C&H never in fact do, as they

acknowledge in their replies in the same symposium (p. 465). I will presently come back to this.

With the defence of T1 thus as their main target, C&H divide the book into four chapters. The first provides a characterisation of relativism, distinguishing it from related views, in particular from rival forms of contextualism. The second addresses one of the arguments for relativism, based on speech act ascriptions. The third chapter critically examines Kaplan's and Lewis' 'operator argument' and some related considerations allegedly favouring relativism. The fourth and final chapter indirectly addresses the most forceful arguments for relativism – based on intuitions about disagreements and retractions – focusing on predicates of personal taste and defending a contextualist semantics for them capable of accounting for such data.

T1, the main thesis that C&H intend to defend from the relativists' attacks, posits propositions and contends that they *fundamentally* have the monadic properties of truth and falsehood. C&H's characterisation of relativism is consistent with this view of what the debate is mainly about. On their proposal, relativism consists of three theses, *Proliferation*, *Disquotationalism* and *Non-Relativity of Semantic Value and Belief Reports*. In contemporary semantics, the truth or falsity of propositions is taken to be 'relative' to a parameter, possible worlds: the same proposition *that snow is white* can be true with respect to a world like the actual one and false relative to another. In that sense, as Kaplan put it, propositions are 'modally neutral'. *Proliferation* adds further parameters. Kaplan contemplated temporally (and perhaps locationally) neutral propositions, which only yield a truth value given not just a possible world, but also a time as a further parameter (and perhaps a place), so that the same time- (and location) neutral proposition *that it rains* can be evaluated relative to the weather at different times (and places) in the same world. Contemporary relativists add additional parameters: standards of taste, standards of precision, epistemic states, among others. *Disquotationalism* is the claim that such propositions obey (with the usual limitations for indexicals) the disquotational schema, *the proposition that P is true if and only if P*; more specifically, by 'allowing for an ordinary truth predicate that can be predicated of parameter-sensitive contents and that functions in such a way that some parameter-sensitive content, C, is true at an *n*-tuple iff the content *The claim that C is true* is true at that *n*-tuple' (p. 14). Finally, *Non-Relativity of Semantic Value and Belief Reports* is the view that, while the truth of a claim by A made with 'Apples are delicious.' might be sensitive to A's standards of taste, the truth of one made by A of 'B believes that apples are delicious' is not thus sensitive to A's standards of taste.

In my view, neither C&H's characterisation of relativism nor T1 in the formulation of *Simplicity* offer a perspicuous representation of what is mainly at stake in these debates. Evans' discussion of temporalism in 'Does Tense Logic Rest upon a Mistake?' (*Collected Papers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 33–63) is the first critical examination of the contemporary, 'analytic' brand of relativism. There he distinguished three forms that such proposals could adopt. Two of them (T$_2$ and T$_3$, the second and third in the order of his discussion) are straightforward semantic proposals to introduce further parameters in the characterisation of contents or

propositions. The divergence between the two depends on whether monadic *truth* or rather relational *satisfaction* is taken as the primary property on which the recursive ascription of semantic values to sentences is assumed to run and is irrelevant here. The *de se* thoughts discussed by Castañeda, Lewis, Perry, Sosa and many others afterward are a case in point. (However – as C&H (pp. 50–4) point out in a short but illuminating discussion of the phenomenon – it is only when we think of the contents of sentences or thoughts as *intensions* – functions from indices to truth-values – that *de se* phenomena appear to require indices with further parameters than worlds. If we think instead of contents as structured entities, it might not be necessary to take them to be properties instead of full-fledged traditional propositions. Besides, diagonalization is a strategy for avoiding further parameters even on the intensional option, as Stalnaker argued in earlier work.)

The other, first interpretation that Evans considers (T_1) does not merely proliferate parameters for the determination of the truth or falsity of propositions; it also has effects on the evaluation of *utterances* or *acts* with such propositions as contents. This 'radical' form of relativism, he says, 'requires us to abandon the idea that particular historical utterances of tensed sentences are assessable, once and for all, as correct or incorrect. Rather, we must acknowledge that the evaluation of particular utterances must change as the world changes' (p. 347). Given the way he goes on to explain the difference between this proposal and the two others (*ibid.*, pp 347–8), it is clear that his distinction between the more 'moderate' form and this 'radical' form is very similar to the one MacFarlane makes between *non-indexical contextualism* and his own *assessment-sensitive relativism*. In a cryptic passage Evans (*ibid.*, p. 349) argues that the radical view is incoherent. Although Percival ('Absolute Truth', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1994, §4) questions some of Evans' contentions in the most illuminating discussion I know of these matters, he ends up agreeing in finding little reason to accept 'the doctrine's consequences for the evaluation of utterances' (p. 208). Already in his first paper on relativism, and indeed ever since, MacFarlane has been rightly concerned with addressing Evans' argument.

My concern is that, by ignoring Evans' and MacFarlane's simple distinction (moderate relativism adds parameters to contents, but keeps the evaluation of utterances/acts absolute; radical relativism allows for conflicting evaluations of the latter), C&H veil what is philosophically at stake and muddy the waters unnecessarily. They are right in pointing out (in the *Philosophical Studies* symposium, p. 461) that in his criticism MacFarlane overlooks that their characterisation does allow them to capture the difference between the 'non-indexical contextualist' or 'moderate' version of relativism and MacFarlane's (or Richard's or Lasersohn's) 'radical' assessment sensitivity. But the problem is that the way they present the debate and their own take on it obscures the issues, and may have prevented them from fully addressing the main considerations relativists enlist in their favour. They name Evans as a 'particularly eloquent proponent of Simplicity … who uses it against some of the same kinds of opponents as we have' (6), but it is unfortunate that they ignore Evans' distinction and the crucially different sort of consideration that he thought appropriate to invoke against one and another form of relativism.

C&H correctly point out that relativists have offered purely semantic arguments for their proposals concerning the best theoretical representation of contents, and in their second and third chapters they do a very good job of addressing those arguments. In ch. 2, they present an illuminating discussion of arguments for Proliferation based on data about speech-act ascriptions – data from 'saying-that' ascriptions, which they take to be weak, and stronger data from ascriptions of agreement and disagreement. They have clear counterexamples (expressions for which a relativist account appears to be out of the question, such as 'left', which nonetheless lend themselves to the relativists' diagnoses) and convincing theoretical alternative accounts ('*parasitic* context sensitivity', 'lambda-abstracted contents'). In ch. 3, they provide a good reconstruction of the 'operator argument' for Proliferation – roughly, the argument that presumes some expressions, such as temporal or modal modifiers, to be sentential operators, aiming to establish that the semantic values of the sentences on which they thus operate depend on parameters that might be shifted by them. Then they instructively discuss different options to resist the argument for different types of expressions.

All this is interesting and helpful, but it is not philosophically enlightening to mix it up with the discussion of the other considerations for relativism to be mentioned in a moment, blurring the distinction between the two forms of relativism that Evans and MacFarlane make. As Glanzberg makes clear in an otherwise sympathetic commentary in another recent symposium on the book (*Analysis* 71, pp. 109–56), whether or not the operator argument succeeds in some particular case is an ultimately empirical issue, which depends on the architecture of natural languages. In another commentary in the same symposium – this one coming from the opposite camp – Weatherson considers arguments based on speech-act reports, and argues that the relativist has some *abductive* advantage against C&H's proposals in chs 2. (In their replies, and although very reluctantly, C&H come to acknowledge that both writers may have a point.) Now, it will not do to insist (as C&H do throughout chs 2 and 3) that on their characterisation the relativist should embrace two further theses in addition to Proliferation, *Disquotationalism* and *Non-Relativity of Semantic Value and Belief Reports*; for, as indicated above, both moderate and radical relativism may also incorporate versions of them. The question is that the latter view is altogether independent of issues concerning the best semantics for natural language sentences and their embeddings. Nor can it be that the dispute turns on whether a monadic property of truth is ontologically fundamental. Both *monadic property* and *ontologically fundamental* are philosophical, deeply theoretical notions, on whose proper understanding there is even less agreement than in other areas in philosophy; while the considerations that radical relativists usually adduce in favour of their views are intuitively straightforward.

These considerations have mostly to do with the proper account of impressions of disagreement (as opposed to the semantics of reports thereof) and mandatory retraction. They apply to different constructions, such as epistemic modals, knowledge ascriptions, etc, but the most natural case is given by predicates of personal taste; this is why MacFarlane devotes the first chapter of his forthcoming book *Assessment Sensitivity* to motivate relativism by discussing them. Now, it is not

that C&H's monograph has nothing interesting to say on predicates of taste. On the contrary, their fourth chapter is one of the several important recent contributions (including work by Huvenes, López de Sa, Schafer, Schaffer, Sundell, and others) making clear to what extent relativist discussions ignore the complexity of the data, and how, by paying attention to whether generics or dispositions are involved, to 'metalinguistic' disagreements, etc., it may yield to a contextualist account. By adopting Evans' and MacFarlane's classification of relativist views, however, clarity would have been gained on the differences between the issues addressed in ch. four and those addressed before. At an intuitive basic level, truth is not predicated of propositions, or it is only predicated of them when they are regarded as the contents of some acts or attitudes – particularly assertoric utterances and beliefs. It is here that issues about disagreement or required retraction arise; and how to understand them is orthogonal to views about the nature of the contents of sentences and how many parameters are relevant for their own 'truth'. Moreover, even though C&H's discussion is truly enlightening, I do not think they fully dispel the relativist points. Some of the authors I have mentioned have suggested, correctly in my view, that the impression of disagreement may respond in part to a practical dimension expressed in the relevant cases. This possibility is much nearer to hand when one is clear that one is addressing issues concerning the evaluation of utterances/acts/attitudes, as opposed to semantic issues about the parameters on which the truth-values of sentential contents are sensitive.

MacFarlane has repeatedly given a straightforward argument for the view that the correctness or otherwise of assessment-sensitive relativism is independent of *Proliferation*. First, assessment-sensitive relativism for future contingents (which C&H do not address in the book) does not require positing further parameters. Secondly, by itself the presence of a possible-world parameter (in the intensions corresponding to modally neutral traditional propositions) does not make for disagreement. C&H discuss this argument (pp. 64–6), which in the *Philosophical Studies* symposium they characterise as 'horrible' (p. 452) in reply to Mark Richard, who had endorsed it (pp. 424–5). I will just consign here my own taste, that what I find truly uncongenial in a neat philosophical argument is the modal contortions and distortions that C&H use in their reply to MacFarlane. As Richard points out. (p. 425), it is not at all difficult to appreciate the intuitions that MacFarlane adduces. Contorting to my own ends one of C&H's examples: Bill correctly thinks that Jim is happy. If Betsy had left Jim – which could easily have happened but in fact did not – Jim would have been very unhappy, and then Frank, a very good friend of Jim's usually well informed about his state of mind, would have known this. But, of course, by having those views about Jim's happiness under such counterfactual circumstances, Frank would not have been in disagreement with Bill on account of his similarly well-informed actual views.

I will conclude with another matter of taste. Of course, one cannot complain that the writing of an academic monograph does not reach the standard of masters of philosophical English with a highly distinctive and elegant style – say, the likes of Quine, Lewis or Williamson. For one thing, there is the pressure to

express one's views on hot topics as quickly as possible. However, to my taste one should at least expect that turns of phrase typical of mostly-male seminar rooms be avoided; things such as aiming 'to nip relativism in the bud', having or lacking a 'silver bullet' against some data, and so on and so forth.

University of Barcelona   MANUEL GARCÍA-CARPINTERO