

Is Global Truth-Relativism Self-Refuting?

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1. Introduction

This paper argues that Global Truth-Relativism (GTR) is not self-refuting. To arrive at this conclusion, I will begin by providing an account of GTR using MacFarlane’s semantic framework for Truth-Relativism. After formulating GTR, three distinct variations of the self-refutation charge (SR) will be examined. The first, due to Mackie and Siegel will be shown to be question begging as a result of it being shown that GTR is an intelligible position, deserving of the truth predicate. Next, Hales “strengthened” SR will be shown to rest on a faulty principle, while further appeals to make a strengthened SR that rely on trans-perspectival truth will be shown to be question begging as well. Finally, Cappelen and Lepore’s challenge to the proponent of GTR will be met by showing that the challenge relies on a “principle of tolerance” that can consistently be rejected by the proponent of GTR. In this way, it will be shown that the proponent of GTR can avoid SR.

2. A Rough Sketch of the Debate

Global Truth Relativism is one of the most ancient and tenacious theories of truth. The truth of an utterance traditionally depends on at most three factors: the way things are in the world, the meaning of the uttered sentence and the context in which the utterance was made. Defiantly, The proponent of GTR suggests that, for all utterances in natural language, these three factors do not fully determine the truth of an utterance. Instead, truth is also determined by our judgments based on the standards of our culture, language, personal experience and a variety of other factors – in short, our perspective. Furthermore, because these standards can vary from perspective to perspective, the truth of an utterance will, in principle, also vary across perspectives¹. For the purposes of this paper, absolutism will be defined in reaction to GTR as the claim that there exists at least one proposition that will remain invariant across distinct perspectives².

¹ If the truth-value did not vary, or at least possibly vary, from perspective to perspective there would be no point in employing the notion of a perspective to makes sense of the truth of the relevant proposition. For example, if a proposition’s truth-value could not vary between perspectives, then the role of a perspective in determining truth would seem to drop out.

² Absolutist positions will typically make further claims such as the idea that truth is not dependent on perspectives at all and that there exists a “view from nowhere”. These positions, however, are stronger than the

As ancient as GTR is SR. While there are many different versions of SR, all suggest that GTR is false if it is assumed to be true by presenting a dilemma. The suggestion is that the proponent of GTR must hold that, if GTR is true, then either,

Horn 1) it is *not* relative to a perspective the GTR is true, or

Horn 2) it is relative to a perspective that GTR is true.

Horn 1) is clearly unacceptable, for if it is not relative to a perspective that GTR is true, then there exists a proposition³ - "GTR is true" - that is not relative to a perspective. This, however, contradicts GTR, for GTR claims that the truth of *all* propositions and utterances is relative to a perspective. No one thinks the proponent of GTR should endorse Horn 1). The contention arises over whether or not Horn 2) is possible. There are a few different ways to show why one might think Horn 2) is just as contradictory as Horn 1). However, before we can assess Horn 2), we must clearly state the content of GTR, showing that it is a crisp and intelligible theory; otherwise we might wonder whether the theory is worth inquiring into at all.

3.1 Picture of a Global Relativist's World:

Before providing a framework for GTR, allow me to canvass a few intuitions about what a genuine GTR would look like. This will allow us to develop conditions under which we can call a semantic framework a genuinely relativist framework. Imagine that Eric and William are in an argument about whether or not the proposition that

A) <God exists>

is true or false. Relative to William's perspective, A) is true and, relative to Eric's perspective, A) is false. Of course, if GTR is true, then both William and Eric are correct in their assessment of A). In other words, *propositional* truth is relative. Moreover, if William uttered A) in a context of use, then William would assess his utterance of A) as true, Eric would assess William's utterance as false and both Eric and William would be right in doing so. Therefore, a semantic framework for GTR must meet the following conditions:

1) *Propositional relativity*, and

2) *Utterance relativity*.

Furthermore, because GTR claims that the truth of *all* utterances is a relative matter, if GTR is true, then the truth of every proposition will be constrained by 1) and 2).

one outlined above, making them less likely to dispel GTR.

³ And presumably an utterance: "GTR is true".

3.2 Detour: Kaplan and the Logic of Indexicals:

In order to provide a robust semantic framework for GTR we need to outline David Kaplan’s semantic framework for sentences containing indexical expressions, for it is from this semantic framework that MacFarlane provides his relativist semantics⁴. What is common to indexicals is that both the truth-value and the proposition expressed by statements using these terms vary *relative to the context in which they are used*. For example, in

B) <I was there>

“I” and “there” are obviously context-sensitive⁵. Kaplan’s framework will show how the context of use allows sentences containing indexicals to a) express determinate propositions and b) have a determinate truth-value. Furthermore, because the truth-value of these kinds of sentences can only be determined *relative* to a context of use, it is easy to see how a detailed theory of indexicals could pave the way for a detailed theory of relativism.

To show how a) is possible, Kaplan distinguishes two layers of meaning: *character* and *content*. On the one hand, B) will take on different meanings when used in different contexts. If used by Kyle in C_1 talking about St Andrews it will express the proposition “Kyle was in St Andrews” and if used by Eric in C_2 concerning Chicago it expresses the proposition “Eric was in Chicago”. Kaplan calls this the *content*. On the other hand, there is the level of meaning that determines the content in the context of use. Kaplan calls this level of meaning the *character* of an indexical expression⁶. Character, for Kaplan is a function from contexts to contents. Hence, in C_1 the character of “I” and “there” will pick out Kyle and St Andrews to determine the content of B) – “Kyle was in St Andrews”.

Furthermore, Kaplan thinks that once the content has been determined in a context of use, the content is *fixed*. For example, imagine that B) was used in C_1 and we want to know the truth-value of B) in a possible world w' in which Kyle had never been to St Andrews. Even though, this possible world is not the possible world of C_1 (in that possible world, w , Kyle *was* in St Andrews), we will, nonetheless, evaluate the content determined in C_1 with respect to w' . This allows us to distinguish the context of use from, what Kaplan calls, the *circumstances of evaluation*. In the simplest case, the circumstance of evaluation is just the world of evaluation. Normally, the default world of evaluation is the world in which the sentence is used. However, we can use modal operators such as “in the nearest possible world it is the case that” and “in w' it is that case that”, to shift the circumstance of evaluation to different possible worlds. According to Kaplan, contents are functions from circumstances of evaluation to extensions. Therefore, it is only *relative* to a circumstance of evaluation that a given content can be true or false⁷. This is an important point – under Kaplan’s framework the *same fixed content* can be evaluated as

⁴ Indexical expressions include the pronouns ‘I’, ‘my’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘it’, the adverbs, ‘here’, ‘now’, ‘tomorrow’, ‘yesterday’, the adjectives ‘actual’ and ‘present’ and others.

⁵ For example, imagine that B) is written on a blackboard and you have no knowledge of the context in which the sentence was written. In this scenario it will be impossible for you to determine what exactly is meant by the sentence on the board and what the truth-value of the sentence is precisely because you do not know *context* in which it was written, i.e. who wrote the sentence, the demonstrations associated with the sentence, ect.

⁶ The character of an indexical expression often take the form of a rule – ‘I’ refers to the speaker of the sentence, ‘there’ refers to the place demonstrated by the speaker – and is fixed across contexts of utterance.

⁷ Kaplan, David (1977) “Demonstratives” in Themes from Kaplan. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.

true relative to one world and false relative to another. This is a kind of relativism, however short of GTR⁸.

3.3 MacFarlane: A Robust GTR

MacFarlane’s strategy to construct a crisp and intelligible relativist semantics is to adjust Kaplan’s framework to meet the conditions of propositional and utterance relativity. Because *one in the same* proposition must be able to be evaluated correctly as both true relative to some perspective and false relative to some other perspective, MacFarlane makes use of Kaplan’s distinction between contexts of use and circumstances of evaluation. In Kaplan’s framework, the context of use will determine, not only the content of an utterance, but also the circumstance of evaluation. In this way, the context of use plays two *distinct* roles: 1) a content-determinative role and 2) a circumstance-determinative role. For example, consider the behaviour of the contingent, eternalized sentence without indexicals in Kaplan’s framework:

C) <On April 22nd, 1992, Kurt Cobain went out to dinner.>

Of course, C) will express the same proposition at every context and even in different possible worlds. However, the context of use will still play at least one important role – determining the possible world against which we evaluate C), i.e. the circumstance of evaluation. This allows one in the same proposition expressed by C) to be true relative to some possible worlds and false relative to others.

Furthermore, MacFarlane notes that the circumstance of evaluation need not exclusively contain possible worlds. For example, temporalists believe that propositions are temporally neutral. Therefore, according to the temporalist, A) expresses the same proposition at 2pm as it does at 3pm, allowing the truth-value of A) to vary from time to time. In this way, the temporalist will include not only possible worlds but also times in the circumstance of evaluation. Thus, we could shift the circumstance of evaluation with modal as well as temporal operators like “at 2pm it will be the case that”. We might even think of propositions as locationally neutral, fitting locations into the circumstances of evaluation as well⁹. These may not be the most orthodox views about propositions, but they are certainly intelligible. The important point here is that, in Kaplan’s framework, we need not evaluate the truth-value of a given content relative to *only* possible worlds. For this reason, MacFarlane suggests that it is at least conceptually possible that we can include parameters other than possible worlds and times in the circumstance of evaluation. We could even have, for example, a religious standards parameter. This brings us closer to a framework for GTR, for now A) will be true according to William’s religious standards and false according to Eric’s religious standards, meeting the propositional relativity condition.

This, however, is not enough for a genuine relativism as utterance truth is still absolute. For example, in William’s utterance of B) the religious standards that matter will be William’s

⁸ It is important that we keep the distinction between contexts of use and circumstances of evaluation, for without it we would have trouble explaining things like utterance necessary truths. For example, an utterance of ‘I am here now’ will be true at every context of use. Therefore, if we did not distinguish contexts of use from circumstances of evaluation ‘I am here now’ would be true in every possible world. This is clearly false.

⁹ It seems like English might contain locational operators: “I few miles from Chicago it is the case that”, ect.

religious standards, for these are the standards in play at the context of utterance. Thus, Eric's assessment that William's utterance is false would be incorrect, for the relevant standards that determine the truth of William's utterance are William's religious standards – not Eric's. In this way, we still fail to meet the utterance relativity condition. MacFarlane's solution is to suggest that it is not the *kind* of parameter that matters to make a GTR framework, but rather the way in which the parameter is treated. It is important to notice that, when dealing with context-sensitive sentences, not only are these sentences used relative to contexts, but they are also *assessed* relative to contexts. Therefore, MacFarlane distinguishes the context of use from the *context of assessment*. Upon closer inspection, a context of assessment is just the relativist's more commonly used notion of a perspective – it is simply a judge who assesses propositions and utterances for truth and falsity according to the relevant standards. Normally, the relevant standards deployed in assessing a proposition or utterance will be one's own. For simplicity sake, I'll talk of perspectives rather than contexts of assessment.

In the same way that a context of use can play a circumstance-determinative role without playing a content-determinative role, a perspective can play a circumstance-determinative role without playing a content-determinative role. For this reason, MacFarlane's semantic framework 1) secures the proposition relativity condition, for B) can correctly be considered true relative to William's perspective and false relative to Eric's perspective in the same way that we saw before, only now using a perspective instead of the standards at a context of use and 2) the utterance relativity condition because the relevant standards in determining the truth-value of an utterance are those according to one's own perspective. Thus, an utterance of B) will correctly be assessed as true from William's perspective and correctly be assessed as false from Eric's perspective. In this way, MacFarlane's framework meets both the propositional and utterance relativity conditions, guaranteeing it as a bona fide relativism. Therefore, a GTR embedded in a Kaplan-style framework would entail that the following bi-conditional hold:

GTR) For *all* sentences S , S is true at a context of use Cu and a perspective Ca iff there is a proposition p such that

- 1) S expresses p at Cu , and
- 2) p is true at the world of Cu and the relevant standards of the assessor at Ca .

Finally, it is important to note that, because the context of use loses its privileged status with the addition of perspectives and because we need to account for the fact that, within GTR, Eric and William can both be equally correct, it is crucial that any formulation of GTR claim that *all perspectives are created equal*, i.e. that according to the *content* of GTR, no perspective is privileged over any other perspective.¹⁰

4.1 Self-Refutation Argument: Mackie and Absolute Self-Refutation

The first suggestion that Horn 2) lands the proponent of GTR in a contradiction comes from Mackie. However, before showing that GTR is self-refuting, Mackie distinguishes claims that

¹⁰ John MacFarlane, 2005: "Making Sense of Relative Truth", Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 105: 321-39.

are a) self-refuting *as a result of asserting the relevant claim* and b) self-refuting *as a result of the content of the relevant claim*. Call the first instances of SR *assertoric* SR and the second instances of SR *content* SR. It is important to note that, even though they are instances of SR, instances of assertoric SR do not entail that the *claim* these instances of SR refute is itself incoherent. Rather, only the *assertion* of this claim is incoherent.

Mackie, however, thinks that GTR is *itself* an incoherent position, for he thinks that the SR argument against GTR is an instance of content SR. The relevant instance of content SR occurs because an operator is *strictly prefixable*:

SP) An operator is strictly prefixable iff, where d is an operator and p is a proposition, if p itself is true, then dp must also be true.

For example, “It is possible that” is a strictly prefixable operator, for everything true is possibly true. In this way, the proposition “it is not the case that something is possible” is an instance of content SR, for it entails that “it is possible that it is not the case that something is possible”. Unlike assertoric SR, absolute SR entails that the *content* of the refuted claim is itself incoherent. It is important to note that all the SR charges assessed in this paper concern content SR and, therefore, have this consequence.

Mackie thinks that Horn 2) is an instance of content SR because “it is absolutely true that” is a strictly prefixable operator. In this way, the second horn of SR is an instance of content SR because Horn 2) entails the strictly prefixable operator “It is absolutely true that”, yielding the contradictory claim “It is absolutely true that it is relative to a perspective whether GTR is true”. In this way, Horn 2) of SR does not go through and GTR is self-refuting¹¹.

4.2 No Question Begging and the Need for a Sensible Theory

The simple response that the proponent of GTR needs to make is to suggest that a) in order for Mackie’s SR to work, it must be the case that “absolutely true” is a strictly prefixable operator and that b) if GTR was true, then “absolutely true” would *not* be a strictly prefixable operator, for true propositions would be relatively rather than absolutely true. In this way, Mackie begs the question against the proponent of GTR.

Harvey Siegel, however, suggests that this solution might not be as straightforward as it sounds. For example, Mackie’s argument would not beg the question if it turned out that the proponent of GTR could not formulate his position without implicit reference to absolute truth. In this way, if we can show that the relativist’s formulation of GTR depends on the notion of absolute truth, then, in the absence of a coherent relativist notion of GTR, it will be open for Mackie to claim that “it is absolutely true that” is a strictly prefixable operator, for we will not have any reason to think there is a theory of truth that is not a kind of absolute truth. Siegel suggests that it might be the case that the formulation of GTR relies on the notion of absolute truth with a question for the relativist: if the relativist thinks that there is no “true” and only “true-for-a-perspective”, what does the relativist mean by “true” in “true-for-a-perspective”? Meiland suggests that it makes no sense to ask this question because the proponent

¹¹ J. L. Mackie, 1964: “Self-Refutation – A Formal Analysis”, *Philosophical Quarterly*.

of GTR, lacking a notion of “truth” simpliciter, would understand the question above as no more intelligible than asking what “cat” in the word “cattle” means. Siegel, however, suggests that this analogy will not work, for unlike the “cat” in “cattle”, “true” in “true-for-a-perspective” is conceptually distinct from the parts that make up “true-for-a-perspective”. The proponent of GTR is, after all, providing us with a theory of *truth*¹². In this way, the proponent of GTR still needs to show what she means by “true”. In essence, the challenge is for the proponent of GTR to show the absolutist why relative truth is deserving of the truth predicate. Once this is shown, the proponent of GTR will be able to suggest that “true” in “true-for-a-perspective” really does just mean “true-for-a-perspective”.

4.3 Making Sense of GTR: GTR and Assertion

In order to answer Seigel’s challenge and establish that GTR is just as deserving of the truth predicate as absolute truth, we can appeal to how MacFarlane “makes sense” of relative truth, by providing a description of the role “true” plays in an account of the speech act of assertion. The strategy is this: start with an explication of truth that is acceptable to the absolutist and then find a job for perspectives in this framework. Having done this, the proponent of GTR can suggest that if the absolutist can make sense of his truth predicate in this framework, he should be able to make sense of GTR being a theory of truth as well. In this way, GTR will be just as deserving of the truth predicate as absolutism.

To provide an account of the role “true” plays in assertion, MacFarlane focuses on the *consequences* of making an assertion. The consequences of making an assertion are the norms that govern our *commitment* to the truth of a proposition. MacFarlane suggests three norms that might be thought to constitute commitment to the truth:

- C) Commitment to withdraw the assertion if it is shown to be false.
- D) Commitment to up hold¹³ the assertion if it is appropriately challenged.
- E) Commitment to be held responsible if someone else either reasons or acts on what has been asserted, and it proves to be false.

It’s easy to see that an account of assertoric commitment should at least include some of these conditions. Imagine someone claiming: “You’re right, what I asserted was not true, but, nonetheless I stand by what I said”. It would be difficult to regard this person as a competent asserter. Likewise, it would be odd if an asserter, when an assertion is challenged and the asserter still believes the assertion to be true, said: “I don’t think your challenge makes my position false, but I won’t up hold my assertion anyway”. Evidence of E) can be found in the following example: imagine that you are told that your favourite band will be playing in the park on Friday. The

¹² Siegel, H, 1986: “Relativism, Truth and Incoherence”, *Sythese* 68: 295 – 312.

¹³ MacFarlane suggests that we are committed to *justifying* the assertion rather than up holding the assertion. However, we can raise doubts about this condition (MacFarlane himself does). For example, imagine a situation in which someone who believes that “God exists” is true, but has no justification for this – he merely takes it as faith. Even if he did not try to justify this assertion when challenged we might still consider this an instance of being committed to the truth (or at least what he considers true). My swapping “up hold” for “justify” is meant to account for these doubts.

band almost never performs these days and you take off work to see them. To your surprise, the band is not there. It would be very odd if, when questioning the person who told you about the band, that person said: “You actually decided to *act* on my assertion? It’s up to *you* to decide what’s worth taking seriously, so that’s not my problem”. In this way, assertoric commitment to the truth should at least include some combination of C), D) and E).

Above we have outlined an account of the role the truth predicate plays in assertion by explaining assertion via the consequences of being committed to the truth. The absolutist should be able to accept that the truth predicate plays this role. Furthermore, it’s easy to see how perspectives can play a part in C), D) and E). For example, if the relevant perspective from which we are committed to the truth is the perspective in which the asserter is evaluating the putative challenge and the relevant context of use is the context in which the proposition is asserted, then we can come to the following construal of C), D) and E):

C*) In asserting that p at C_1 , one commits oneself to withdrawing the assertion (in any future context C_2) if p is shown to be false relative to context of use C_2 and perspective C_2 .

D*) In asserting that p at C_1 , one commits oneself to up holding p in the face challenges in a future context C_2 if p is true relative to a context of use C_1 and a perspective C_2 .

R*) In asserting that p at C_1 , one commits oneself to withdrawing the assertion (in any future context C_2) if because of this assertion someone else takes p to be true (relative to a context of use C_1 and a perspective C_2) and it proves to be false (relative to C_1 and C_2).

In this way, perspectives can play a part in a framework for the role of the truth predicate in the speech act of assertion that can be embraced by both the absolutist and the proponent of GTR¹⁴. Therefore, the absolutist should be able to accept that GTR has just as much right to the truth predicate as the absolutist, allowing the proponent of GTR to suggest that “true” in “true-for-a-perspective” can simply mean “true-for-a-perspective”. In this way, the proponent of GTR can meet Siegel’s challenge.

5. The Self-Refutation Argument: Take Two

Once arguments like Mackie’s are solved, opponents of GTR will focus on the relative truth of GTR entailing that GTR is false in some perspective. The second horn of the argument is now analyzed in the following way:

Horn 2)

- 1) it is relative to a perspective that GTR is true
- 2) if it is relative to a perspective that GTR is true, then GTR is false at the standards of some perspective.

Sometimes the opponent of GTR will wrongly conclude from 2) that

¹⁴ John MacFarlane, 2005: “Making Sense of Relative Truth”, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 105: 321-39.

3) If GTR is false at the standards of some perspective, then GTR is false

Therefore,

4) GTR is false.

To conclude 4) is clearly question begging, All that follows from the antecedent of 3) is that GTR is false *at the standards of some perspective*, for there is no false simpliciter if GTR is true. The argument unjustifiably drops the relativistic qualifier “at the standards of some perspective”.

There are two strategies open to the opponent of GTR. First, the opponent of GTR can argue that GTR being false at the standards of some perspective actually entails GTR being true in all perspectives, leading us back to the first horn – GTR being absolutely true¹⁵. Call these kinds of arguments *strengthened* SRs. Second, the opponent of GTR can suggest that the antecedent of 3) is in and of itself problem enough for the relativist.

6.1 Hales’ Strengthened SR: Relativism and Modality

Steven Hales, in his attempt to save GTR from the SR charge, provides the opponent of GTR with the first strategy. Hales does this by re-analyzing the SR argument via an analogy between perspectives and possible worlds. However, before showing that the SR charge is stronger than initially supposed, Hales further explains the force of the second horn of the SR charge:

SSR) Consider the latter case, a perspective in which relativism is untrue. In such a perspective, call it p , not-relativism – that is, absolutism, is true. Now, absolutism is true only if there is some proposition that has the same truth value in all perspectives. . . However, it does not seem that p could contain such a proposition. . . given the assumption that there are perspectives in which relativism is true – we are guaranteed that the truth value of every proposition ϕ will vary across perspectives. Hence, there is no proposition that is true in all perspectives; that is, for every proposition there are perspectives in which it is true and perspectives in which it is untrue. Then relativism is true in all perspectives, and this, I have already shown entails that relativism is untrue¹⁶.

In this way, Hales shows that the thought that there are propositions in which absolutism is true in the second horn of the SR charge leads us back to the first horn of the SR charge, entailing the falsity of GTR. Hales, then attempts to show exactly why we are allowed to make this inference.

For Hales, the inference in the second horn that entails the falsity of GTR relies on an implicit analogy made between a proposition’s being true relative to a possible world and a proposition’s being true relative to the standards of a perspective. Initially this seems far-fetched. However, recall that in MacFarlane’s relativist framework, being true relative to a set of standards determined by a perspective is a lot like being true relative to a possible world – both are ways of being true via a circumstance of evaluation. With this analogy in mind, Hales invites us to think of the logic of GTR in much the same way that we think of the logic of possible worlds. In modal logic, possibility is represented by the operator, \diamond , while necessity is

¹⁵ The opponent of GTR could also argue that GTR is false in every perspective – but it seems like the easiest way to do this is to lead the proponent of GTR back to Horn 1), landing him in a contradiction.

¹⁶ Hales, Steven, 1997: “A Consistent Relativism”, *Mind* 106.

represented the operator, \Box , such that ‘possibly p ’ is represented as ‘ $\Diamond p$ ’ and ‘necessarily p ’ is represented as ‘ $\Box p$ ’. In the same way, Hales suggests that \blacklozenge be an operator that takes sentences and indexes them to the standards of a perspective such that, ‘ $\blacklozenge p$ ’ be read as ‘it is relatively true (true in some perspective) that p ’. Hales further introduces the absolute operator, \blacksquare , such that, ‘ $\blacksquare p$ ’ be read as ‘it is absolutely true (true in all perspectives) that p ’. Moreover, in the same way that there is an accessibility relation between possible worlds, Hales suggests that there be a commensurability relation between perspectives, such that calling a perspective Ca commensurable to a perspective Ca' is roughly the same as saying that Ca' is a consistent or compatible perspective with Ca given certain facts about Ca .

Finally, Hales suggests that in the same way that in modal system $S5$ we adopt the theorem

$$\text{M) } \Diamond\Box p \Rightarrow \Box p,$$

in the logic of relativism we should adopt a similar principle

$$\text{P) } \blacklozenge\blacksquare p \Rightarrow \blacksquare p.$$

Hales suggests that the inference in SSR) relies on principle P). In Hales’ analysis of the second horn of the SR charge above, because there must be a perspective in which GTR is false and absolutism is true, there must be some perspective in which some p is true in all perspectives – formally, $\blacklozenge\blacksquare p$. However, we *also* saw that, because we assumed that GTR was relatively true, it could not be the case that there be a p such that p is true in all perspectives – formally, it could not be the case that $\blacksquare p$. Therefore, because $\blacksquare p$ is false, via principle P) and modus tollens, $\blacklozenge\blacksquare p$ must also be false, taking us back to the first horn of the SR charge – that, relativism is true in all perspectives. Therefore, our reliance on principle P) in analogy with modal logic provides a strengthened SR charge. It looks like the proponent of GTR is not safe to claim that GTR is merely relatively true.

6.2 Hales’ Solution: Relatively and Relatively True

Fortunately for the proponent of GTR, Hales has a solution to the strengthened SR charge. This again relies on the analogy between relativism and modality. Consider the proposition: “everything is possible”, i.e. “for all p , $\Diamond p$ ”. Allow p to be “it is necessarily false that for all p , possibly p ”. If this is the case, then the following is true: “possibly, it is necessarily false that for all p , possibly p ”. Furthermore, via theorem M), we can conclude that “it is necessarily false that for all p , possibly p ”. Therefore, by reductio, in modal system $S5$, it cannot be the case that everything is possible. This argument follows a similar line of reasoning as the strengthened SR charge. Yet, no one is prepared to give up talk of possibility just because ‘everything is possible’ is false. Rather, in the face of this argument, we can still hold on to the proposition that ‘everything true is possibly true’. Indeed, this is just a well-known theorem of $S5$.

In the same way, Hales suggests that the strengthened SR charge denies the proposition that ‘everything is relative’, i.e. “for all p , $\blacklozenge p$ ”, but does not deny the proposition that “everything true is relatively true”. Concomitantly, if “everything true is relatively true” is true, then “everything

untrue is relatively untrue” is true as well. According to Hales, this is all the proponent of GTR needs¹⁷.

6.3 Problem’s with Hales’ Solution and the Strengthened SR Charge

Hales uses the analogy between truth relative to the standards of a perspective and truth relative to a possible world to vindicate both the strengthened SR charge and his solution of to the strengthened SR charge. However, he does not give a direct argument for this analogy. Nevertheless, there are still reasons to think that the analogy obtains. As already stated, MacFarlane’s relativist framework lends itself to thinking about relativism and possibility in the same way. A proposition’s being true relative to a perspective and true relative to a possible world is just part of the greater story of being true relative to the details of a circumstance of evaluation. In the same way that the truth of a proposition can change according to possibility and necessity operators, so too it might seem appropriate that the truth of a proposition change according to relativistic operators such as “according to Eric’s religious standards it is the case that”. Moreover, we might think that the reasoning in SSR) is sound and Hales analysis seems to explain this reasoning. Therefore, perhaps we can grant Hales’ analogy.

Despite this, there are significant problems with Hales analysis. First, note that the proposition ‘everything true is possibly true’ does not entail the proposition ‘nothing is necessarily true’. In the same way, ‘everything true is relatively true’ will, in Hales logic, not entail that ‘nothing is absolutely true’. Therefore, Hales logic does nothing to suggest that there is no absolute truth¹⁸.

Finally, recall that both Hales’ analysis of the SR charge and his solution depend on the use of principle P) in the strengthened SR. Furthermore, recall that Hales adopted principle P) because of theorem M) in modal system S5. However, theorem M) is *only* a principle of S5 and is not a theorem in any other the other modal systems, such as S4. The reason why M) is a theorem of S5 exclusively is because of the accessibility relation between worlds in S5. In S5 every world is accessible to every other world and, therefore, the accessibility relation between worlds is both symmetrical and transitive. In this way, if it is true in S5 at a world w that $\Diamond\Box p$, then there is a world w' where $\Box p$ obtains, i.e. where p is true at all the worlds accessible from w' . Therefore, because the accessibility relation in S5 is symmetrical and transitive, meaning that every world is accessible to every other world, w' is accessible to the same worlds as w . Hence, $\Box p$ will obtain at w as well, making M) a theorem of S5. In this way, M) being a theorem of S5 depends on the accessibility relation between worlds being symmetrical and transitive¹⁹.

Recall that in Hales’ logic of relativism, he substitutes the accessibility relation for a commensurability relation. Therefore, in the same way that the adoption of theorem M) depends on the accessibility relation between worlds being symmetrical and transitive, the adoption of principle P) should depend on the commensurability relation between perspectives being sym-

¹⁷ Hales, Steven, 1997: “A Consistent Relativism”, *Mind* 106.

¹⁸ Hales does not think this is a problem, for he sees his logic of relativism as a *neutral* ground between proponents and opponents of GTR. In this way, Hales thinks that the proponent of GTR must find *evidence* that there are no absolutely true propositions rather than relying on the logic of relativism to vindicate his claim.

¹⁹ Kölbel, Max 1999: ‘Saving Relativism from Its Saviour’. *Critica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía*, 31, pp. 91-103.

metrical and transitive, otherwise Hales' adoption of principle P) will appear arbitrary²⁰. In this way, if we have reason to think that the commensurability relation between perspectives is not symmetrical and transitive, we will have reason to reject the inclusion of principle P) into the logic of relativism and, therefore, reason to reject Hales' strengthened SR and solution to the strengthened SR.

It does not seem plausible that the commensurability relation in the logic of relativism be best represented as symmetrical and transitive. For example, consider the central disagreement of SR: the relativist R believes that GTR is true and also, because he believes in GTR, that if an absolutist A comes along and has her own reasons for believing that GTR is false, then R will respect A 's position – it will not contradict R 's own views. However, the same will not be true of A . Because A is an absolutist about the falsity of GTR, R 's belief that GTR is true will contradict A 's position. In this way, A 's perspective will be commensurable to R 's perspective, but R 's perspective will not be commensurable to A 's perspective. Therefore, A 's perspective and R 's perspective have an *asymmetrical* commensurability relation. Thus, the commensurability relation in the logic of relativism is not best represented by transitivity and symmetry, giving us no reason to accept principle P) and, therefore, no reason to accept Hales' strengthened SR and his solution to SR²¹.

6.4 Trans-Perspectival Truth

Despite that fact that Hales' analysis of SR remains unconvincing, Hales original restatement of Horn 2) in SSR) still *seems* to lead the relativist back to Horn 1). In order to better understand why we might think the relativist is led back to the first horn of SR, we would do well to make a distinction that has not been clearly stated in the literature. We can distinguish between truth in a perspective and *trans-perspectival* truth where

TP) a proposition p is trans-perspectivally true iff the truth-value of p depends on the truth-values of propositions across a set of perspectives.

If we look back at SSR), it seems that we are led back to the first horn of SR when we consider that, a) in order for absolutism to be true in a perspective there must be some proposition that is true in all perspectives, for this is the definition of absolutism; but b) there can be no such proposition because, in order for GTR to be true in a perspective, the truth-value of every proposition must vary between perspectives.

This line of reasoning seems compelling because both absolutism and GTR, if true, are trans-perspectivally true positions in so far as their truth and falsity depends on the truth-values of propositions within the relevant range of perspectives. In this way, we can make sense of Hales initial observation in SSR) by appealing to trans-perspectival truth: we are allowed to infer that if absolutism is true in *some* perspective then, *because the truth of absolutism depends on other perspectives*, we are allowed to infer that there must be a proposition in every perspective whose

²⁰ Even if the relativism and modality analogy holds we will still not be provided with a reason to treat the logic of relativism like S5 as opposed to, say, S4.

²¹ Shogenji, Tomoji 1997: 'The Consistency of Global Relativism'. *Mind*, 106, pp. 745-47.

truth-value remains invariant. Likewise, because GTR is trans-perspectivally true, GTR will be true in *some* perspective only if there actually is *no* proposition whose truth-value remains invariant across perspectives. Hales used principle P) to show why it might be valid to infer that if absolutism is true in *some* perspective, then there must be some proposition p whose truth-value remains invariant across perspectives. In the absence of Hales analysis, however, we can still make sense of this inference by appealing to the notion of trans-perspectival truth. In this way, we can see why we might be lead to think that the second horn of SR leads us back to the first horn, providing us with a strengthened SR. Unfortunately, appealing the notion of trans-perspectival truth will not provide us with a valid strengthened SR.

6.5 Back to the Original Problem

Both Kobel and Bennington suggest that, even if we introduce the notion of trans-perspectival truth, we still drop the relativistic qualifiers, begging the question against the proponent of GTR. The core of the claim is that, if GTR is true, then propositions that are trans-perspectivally true will vary in truth-value from perspective to perspective as well. Hence, in appealing to the notion of trans-perspectival truth to create a strengthened SR, we beg the question against GTR. We seem to be forgetting that GTR allows no truth but truth within a perspective. Kobel shows how Hales initial observation does not pose a problem for the relativist formally:

Definitions:

p = a proposition

r , s and t = perspectives

T = true at the standards of a perspective

GTR = $\forall p(\exists r, s(Trp \wedge \neg Tsp))$

Abs = $\exists p(\forall r, s(Trp \leftrightarrow Tsp))$

Horn 2):

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1) $\exists r, s(Tr(GTR) \wedge \neg Ts(GTR))$ | Relative GTR |
| 2) $\exists s(\neg Ts(GTR))$ | Detached second conjunct |
| 3) $\exists s(Ts(Abs))$ | Entailed by 2) |
| 4) $\exists s(Ts(\exists p((\forall r, t(Trp \leftrightarrow Ttp))))$ | Identity with absolutism |
| 5) $\exists r(Tr(GTR))$ | First conjunct of 1) |
| 6) $\exists r(Tr(\forall p((\exists s, t(Tsp \wedge \neg Ttp))))$ | Identity with GTR |

Notice, there is no formal conflict between 4) and 6) and, therefore, no formal conflict between 3) and 5) as well. In this way, given the assumption that there are perspectives in which GTR is true, it does *not* follow that the truth-value of every proposition will vary across perspectives.

Rather, it only follows that *within the perspective in which GTR is true* the truth-value of every proposition will vary across perspectives. Likewise, if absolutism is true in a perspective, all that follows is that *within the perspective in which absolutism is true* there will be a proposition whose truth-value remains invariant across perspectives²². In this way, strengthened SR arguments do not work.

7. Cappelen and Lepore's Challenge:

Recall that the absolutist has two strategies that she can use to make the second horn of SR work: either the opponent of GTR can argue that GTR being false at the standards of *some* perspective actually entails GTR being true in all perspectives, or the opponent of GTR can suggest that the antecedent of 3) in and of itself is problem enough for the relativist. We saw that the first option did not work. Cappelen and Lepore (CL) have issued a challenge to the Radical Contextualist²³ that can easily be made into an SR argument endorsing the second strategy.

Their objection comes in the form of a challenge: even if GTR is true at the standards of the relativist's perspective and false at the standards of the absolutist's perspective (call being true and false at the standards of the absolutist's perspective true* and false*, respectively, to differentiate it from being true and false at the standards of the relativist), then why doesn't the proponent of GTR worry about being false*? Why should the proponent of GTR only be concerned about avoiding being false and not care about being false* if, as GTR holds, no perspective is privileged over other perspectives? Isn't it just as bad to be false* as it is to be false? In this way, CL exploit one of GTR's central tenants – that all perspectives are created equal – to challenge Horn 2) of SR²⁴.

If the proponent of GTR is to be concerned about being false*, he must have some reason to be committed²⁵ to GTR being false*. Hence, if CL's challenge is to carry any weight, then the proponent of GTR should endorse the following principle:

Principle of Tolerance (PT): One should not ignore any genuinely held perspective.

Holding on to PT is what would prevent the relativist from *not being concerned* that his position is false* or committed to his position being false*. Furthermore, if CL's challenge is to be an instance of SR, it must *at least* put GTR in danger of being inconsistent. Therefore, if CL's challenge is to hold up, it needs to be shown that PT is a necessary condition of GTR, rendering the rejection of PT inconsistent with GTR. The strategy that I propose for the proponent of GTR is to show that PT can be rejected and not contradict the content of GTR.

Unfortunately for the absolutist, PT is not a necessary condition of GTR. For example, imagine a relativist R and an absolutist A who disagree about the truth-value of GTR. It seems

²² Kölbel, Max 1999: 'Saving Relativism from Its Saviour'. *Critica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía*, 31, pp. 91-103.

²³ Radical Contextualism suggests that all expressions in natural language are context sensitive. Therefore, the Radical Contextualist holds that all utterances are true in some contexts and false in others.

²⁴ Cappelen and Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics*, 2005.

²⁵ What I mean by committed to being false* is that the proponent of GTR treat being false* in the same way that he would being false. Truth and falsity will be something that will play a certain role in the life of the relativist, the suggestion here is that true* and false* should play the same role.

perfectly possible that R believe the content of GTR and yet *treat* A as though he is not worth listening to. In fact, this kind of situation is not merely possible, it is actual: Thomas Kuhn suggests that if you are established inside a prospering paradigm, it is perfectly all right if you don't care about doing justice to competing paradigms. Richard Rorty as well suggests, in his relativism, that if the central humanitarian values of our culture are threatened, we are entitled to fight them. The reason why the proponent of GTR can consistently reject PT is that PT is a normative principle and GTR is a descriptive claim. In this way, just because the proponent of GTR believes that all perspectives are of equal worth does not entail that the proponent of GTR *should* treat other perspectives as equal²⁶. Therefore, the proponent of GTR is free to reject PT and, thus, consistently able to disregard GTR being false*.

One might object, however, to this move by claiming that the issue is not normative. For example, we can follow Lasersohn in distinguishing three different “stances” that one can take in a relativist framework when assessing the truth of an utterance. We can take a

- 1) *Autocentric perspective* where the utterance is assessed relative to the standards of our own perspective,
- 2) *Acentric perspective* where no particular perspective is used to assess the utterance, or an
- 3) *Exocentric perspective* where the utterance is evaluated relative to the standards of a perspective other than our own.

Imagine that we are proponents of GTR. Then, by rejecting PT and disregarding the absolutists perspective, we are taking up an autocentric perspective – we evaluate GTR as true rather than false* because GTR is true at our standards. We can make a further distinction between 1) the *content of GTR* and 2) *any position embraced by any given proponent of GTR*. Notice that the content of GTR is not biased with respect to perspectives – all perspectives are created equal. One might suggest, therefore, that *qua inhabitant of a perspective* we are free to ignore the absolutist by taking an autocentric perspective but *qua proponent of GTR* we inhabit an acentric perspective. Therefore, qua proponents of GTR we cannot use the above solution to CL's challenge.

The problem with this response is that merely inhabiting an acentric perspective should not worry the proponent of GTR, it is simply what GTR states. From an acentric perspective the proponent of GTR might be aware that GTR is both true and false* but, as he inhabits an acentric perspective, he will not be *committed* to GTR either being true or false* and, therefore, not worried about being false*. In order for CL's challenge to worry the proponent of GTR, CL must suggest that the proponent of GTR should be *committed* to GTR being false* - to take an exocentric perspective. PT could force the relativist to take this perspective by giving reason to commit to the absolutist's standards. However, as shown above, the proponent of GTR need not endorse PT²⁷. Furthermore, it is important to note that in rejecting PT we are not rejecting the

²⁶ The thought here is the same as Hume's “is/ought” problem, i.e. that you cannot derive an “ought” from and “is”.

²⁷ This solution to CL's challenge and response to the solution were inspired by a dialogue between Lockie and Tolland concerning Lockie's paper “Relativism and Reflexivity”.

claim that all perspectives are created equal. Rather, the proponent of GTR is merely rejecting the *treating* of GTR being false* in the same way that he would if it was false.

8. Conclusion

It has been shown that three distinct SR arguments concerning Horn 2) of SR should not worry the proponent of GTR. Therefore, GTR is not an inconsistent or self-refuting position. However, recall that the arguments reviewed only concern whether or not GTR is self-refuting as a result of the *content* of GTR. It remains to be shown whether or not GTR can coherently be argued for or asserted. In this way, with the question of whether or not the content of GTR is inconsistent laid to rest, perhaps the dialectic towards showing that GTR is an untenable position should concern the possibility of GTR being able to be coherently asserted.

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