A Consistent Relativism

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Relativism is one of the most tenacious theories about truth, with a pedigree as old as philosophy itself. Nearly as ancient is the chief criticism of relativism, namely the charge that the theory is self-refuting. This paper develops a logic of relativism that (1) illuminates the classic self-refutation charge and shows how to escape it; (2) makes rigorous the ideas of truth as relative and truth as absolute, and shows the relations between them; (3) develops an intensional logic for relativism; (4) provides a framework in which relativists can consistently promote ethical, mathematical, scientific, religious, and political truths (among others) as being relative; (5) argues that the notion of incommensurability is far less troubling than is commonly thought; and (6) argues that the concept of a perspective as needed by the theory is not prey to Davidson's well-known critique of conceptual schemes. The paper will not defend relativism as the correct theory of truth, nor will it provide a fully satisfying theory about the nature of a perspective. The logic of relativism is primarily meant to provide a formal framework in which relativists can consistently develop their theories. This alone is a considerable step forward, since the debate about relativism often founders upon the rock of self-refutation. It is argued that while "everything is relative" is inconsistent, "everything true is relatively true" is not. The latter is all a relativist really needs.

"We all know that cultural relativism is inconsistent."
(Putnam 1983, p. 236)

I

Relativism is one of the most tenacious theories about truth, with a pedigree as old as philosophy itself. Nearly as ancient is the chief criticism of relativism, namely the charge that the theory is self-refuting.[1] This paper will develop a logic of relativism that will (1) illuminate the self-refutation charge and show how to escape it; (2) make rigorous the ideas of truth as relative and truth as absolute, and show the relations between them; (3) develop an intensional logic for relativism; (4) provide a framework in

[1] Opponents of relativism are legion. Recent worthies who subscribe to the self-refutation thesis include Putnam (1981, pp. 119–24; see also the epigraph); Margolis (1991, pp. 9–13; the kind of relativism Margolis considers "logically incoherent" and I show is not is what he calls "relationalism"); Harris (1992, pp. 70–1, 82–4, 193); Rorty (1991, p. 23); and McGrew (1994). Ancient worthies include Plato, *Theaetetus* and Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IV, Chs. 4–5.

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which relativists can consistently promote ethical, mathematical, scientific, religious, and political truths (among others) as being relative; (5) argue that the notion of incommensurability is far less troubling than is commonly thought; and (6) argue that the concept of a perspective as needed by the theory is not prey to Davidson's well-known critique of conceptual schemes. The paper will not defend relativism as the correct theory of truth, nor will it provide a fully satisfying theory about the nature of a perspective. I will say something about how a perspective is to be understood and its role in the logic of relativism, but the remarks to be made are tentative and incomplete. The logic of relativism is primarily meant to provide a rigorous framework in which relativists can consistently develop their theories. This alone is a considerable step forward, since the debate about relativism often founders upon the rock of self-refutation. We will see that while "everything is relative" is inconsistent "everything true is relatively true" is not. The latter is all a relativist really needs.

The celebrated charge of self-refutation goes roughly like this: the relativist thesis is that everything is relative (nothing is absolute). Well, what about the claim itself, that *everything is relative*? It must just be relative too—relative to a perspective, conceptual scheme, viewpoint, or what have you. In other words, there are perspectives in which the relativism thesis is true, and there are those in which it is untrue. After all, its truth is relative. Hence there is a perspective in which absolutism is true. This seems like a paradox, or a contradiction, or something. Exactly what the problem is will be made clear shortly. To get at the heart of this argument, let us compare the claim that everything is relative with the claim that everything is possible.

Suppose that everything is possible. That is, for all Φ, $\Diamond \Phi$. Allow Φ to be "it is necessarily untrue that everything is possible". Then the following turns out to be true: possibly, it is necessarily untrue that everything is possible. A well-known theorem in modal system S5 tells us that whatever is possibly necessary is necessary. We can thereby conclude that it is necessarily untrue that everything is possible. Thus by reductio, it cannot be the case that everything is possible. So what should we do? Should we abandon all talk of modality, give up possibility and necessity, and purge ourselves of possible worlds? Of course not (not as the result of this problem anyway). No one is seriously prepared to claim that everything is possible. Yet everyone *is* prepared to affirm this thesis: everything that is true is possibly true. There are two important things to note about this thesis. The first is that it does not entail that nothing is necessarily true. That is, to say that everything true is possibly true does not mean that everything true is merely, or only, possibly true. Something possibly true could also

be necessarily true. The second thing to note is that the thesis that everything true is possibly true does not entail that possible truth is a cheap version of real, actual truth. It may be that possible truth is weaker than actual truth, or somehow is not as good, but the matter is hardly straightforward. After all, modal realists hold precisely that possible truth is every bit as good as "actual" truth, or that there is no salient difference between the two.

Consider then the problem faced by the relativist. Suppose that the relativist claims that everything is relative (nothing is absolute). That is, for all Φ, Φ is true relatively. Let $\blacklozenge$ be an operator that takes sentences and indexes them to perspectives, so that $\blacklozenge\Phi$ is to be read as "it is relatively true (true in some perspective) that Φ". The claim that everything is relative is thus: for all Φ, $\blacklozenge\Phi$. Suppose that we allow Φ to be "it is absolutely untrue that everything is relative". Then the following turns out to be true: relatively, it is absolutely untrue that everything is relative. If we accept an S5-like theorem that whatever is relatively absolute is absolute, then it will follow straightaway that it is absolutely untrue that everything is relative. And, by reductio, the relativist thesis is false. Of course, for this argument to work, we need some motivation to think that whatever is relatively absolute is absolute. Let us introduce $\blacksquare$ as an "absolute" operator so that $\blacksquare\Phi$ is to be read as "it is absolutely true (true in all perspectives) that Φ". The principle under consideration—the one that permits the reductio on *everything is relative*—is thus formalized:

$$\mathsf{P}: \blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi \Rightarrow \blacksquare\Phi$$

Here are some semantical reflections on absolutism and relativism that are meant simultaneously to sharpen the standard charge of self-refutation and show that the root intuition behind this charge lies in the acceptance of P. The relativism thesis is *everything is relative*. Absolutism can be characterized as a denial of this, or *not everything is relative*. By "everything is relative", let us understand the claim that every proposition is true in some perspective and untrue in another. Thus absolutism is then: there is at least one proposition which has the same truth value in all perspectives. Clearly, either the thesis of relativism is true absolutely (true in all perspectives) or just relatively (true in some, but not all perspectives). Suppose that relativism is true in all perspectives. If so, then there is a proposition which has the same truth value in all perspectives—viz., the thesis of relativism itself. Yet, if there is some proposition which has the same truth value in all perspectives, then absolutism is true. Thus if relativism is true in all perspectives, absolutism is true; equivalently, if relativism is true in all perspectives then by reductio relativism is untrue.

Suppose then that relativism is merely relatively true, i.e. true in some perspectives and untrue in others. 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. That is, in *p* there is some Φ such that ■Φ. However, it does not seem that *p* could contain such a proposition. Φ could not be the thesis of absolutism itself, since *ex hypothesi* there are perspectives in which it is untrue and relativism is true. Nor could Φ be the thesis of relativism, since *ex hypothesi* there are perspectives in which it is untrue. Nor do any other candidates for Φ look promising since—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 untrue. Thus it seems that relativism can be neither absolutely nor relatively true. The claim that *everything is relative* must be false.

Look at the situation that developed in the last paragraph. There we considered the option of relativism being relatively untrue. Therefore, in some perspective there was a proposition Φ that was absolutely true. Formally: ◆■Φ. Yet it turned out that there could not be such a proposition since the assumption of relativism prevented any proposition from being true in all perspectives. In other words, there could not be a Φ such that ■Φ. This is why ◆■Φ could not be true. The form underlying this argument is modus tollens. The conditional relied upon is none other than principle P: ◆■Φ ⇒■Φ. Thus it turns out that P is vindicated.

Here are two interesting features of this analysis. First, the perennially popular attempts to save relativism from self-refutation by declaring the relativism thesis itself to be true merely relatively are completely misguided.[2] If relativism is true merely relatively, then there is a perspective in which absolutism is true, and on principle P it follows that absolutism is true and thus that relativism is false. Second, it is often thought that the self-reference problem faced by relativism is a liar-like paradox.[3] The preceding arguments show that it is not—it is straightforward self-contradiction. A truly paradoxical sentence cannot have a stable truth-value. "Everything is relative" does have a stable truth-value—namely, *false*.

The solution to the problem of self-refutation is as follows. Recall that it cannot be the case that everything is possible because the claim runs

[2] For some attempts along these lines, see Bennigson (1994); Schrift (1990, p. 153; Gemes (1992); Hinman (1982); Stack (1981); and Cinelli (1993).

[3] For example, in Hales and Welshon (1994). Some authors apparently use "self-refuting" and "paradoxical" indifferently. See Meiland (1980); Beach (1984); and Margolis (1991).

afoul of the principle that whatever is possibly necessary is necessary. As we have seen, it cannot be the case that everything is relative either, because the claim runs afoul of the intuitive principle that whatever is relatively absolute is absolute. However, just as we can safely assert that whatever is true is possibly true (and concomitantly whatever is untrue is possibly untrue), so too the relativist can claim that whatever is true is relatively true (and whatever is untrue is relatively untrue). The relativist is free to abandon the odoriferous view that everything is relative, and instead promote the more modest view just stated. There is nothing self-contradictory or paradoxical about the claim that everything true is relatively true, just as there is no puzzle engendered by the claim that whatever is true is possibly true. As in the case of alethic modality, it is entirely consistent for the new-and-improved relativist to hold that some propositions are absolutely true, and that perspectival truth is every bit as decent and upstanding as "real" truth. Indeed, "real" truth is just truth in this perspective, just as actual truth is truth in this world. Absolute truth turns out to be truth in all perspectives, just as necessary truth is truth in all worlds. For the relativist it will be nonsense to talk about truth outside of the structure of perspectives—i.e. non-perspectival or extra-perspectival truth. However, formally this stricture should be no scarier than forbidding talk of truth outside of the structure of worlds once we have accepted possible world semantics. We do need arguments for thinking that truth is or ought to be indexed to perspectives (as it is to languages and worlds), but we should not be dissuaded from relativism because of worries about it being logically incoherent or self-refuting.

II

A relativist will be loathe to accept principle P since its acceptance yields that their own position is self-refuting. Nevertheless, it is not in their best interest to reject it. Honest relativists worry about the self-refutation problem, and any adequate account of relativism should be able not only to defuse the puzzle, but to explain its power. The analysis above locates the problem at the conjunction of "everything is relative" and P. The revised relativism of "everything true is relatively true" avoids the self-refuting conflict with P. A relativist who rejects P in order to keep "everything is relative" is once again saddled with the task of explaining and solving the self-refutation problem, and thus pays a hefty price for goods of dubious merit.

Still, relativists will no doubt be of mixed minds about the proposed revision. They will be disgruntled that (1) the view is consistent with all

truths being absolutely so, and (2) principle P (and the other axioms and theorems of the relativist logic detailed in the appendix) is absolutely true. On the other hand, relativists should be pleased that the view proposed is also consistent with most truths being merely relatively (and not absolutely) true. It is then up to the relativists to argue that most truths are merely relatively true. They must earn through honest toil what a logic that entailed that some truths are merely relatively true would obtain by theft. The second concern of the relativists, that P is absolutely true, is a bullet that they must bite. This is the compromise they must make if relativists hope to achieve any kind of rapprochement with absolutists. A relativist who is wholly unconcerned with either logical consistency or taking the concerns of absolutists seriously will be unpersuaded by much of this paper. There is not much that can be done about that.

It is a benefit of my proposal that the truth of a robust relativism does not fall out of or is not embedded in the logic of relativism. Relativists need to argue for their strong claims, not simply write up a logic in which their claims are true. Absolutists and relativists are in many ways at the same impasse that Spinozists and anti-Spinozists were at years ago. Spinoza held that all truths are necessarily so whereas most other philosophers have demurred that at least some truths are contingent. A real advance in this debate was the development of a logic that explained possible truth, necessary truth, contingency, and the relations among these in a way that did not clearly tip the balance in favor of either Spinoza or his adversaries. This logic is of course our now-familiar alethic modal logic. Spinoza would find "possible worlds talk" pointless, unnecessary, and perhaps even empty. So do philosophers at the other end of the spectrum from Spinoza, who hold that all truths are contingent (Quine in some moods). Yet these are the limiting positions on a logic that is widely accepted as providing the common ground required for meaningful dialogue about which, if any, truths are contingent and which, if any, are necessary. We would undoubtedly consider it sophistry if an anti-Spinozist merely devised a modal logic in which some truths turned out to be contingent. This would hardly persuade someone who thought all truths are necessarily true. It is a benefit of the analysis of relativism offered here that absolutists can accept the formal system as well as relativists. That way all disputants can quit arguing about the self-refutation problem, or talking past each other, and consider reasons for and against strong relativist claims on equal footing.

Absolutists will also be of mixed minds. They will be disgruntled that (1) the view is consistent with most truths being merely relative (and not also absolutely true), and (2) the semantics of this relativist logic are committed to perspectives and the indexing of truth to them. On the other

hand, absolutists should be pleased that that the view proposed is formally consistent and offers a logic with absolutely true axioms and theorems. It is up to absolutists to argue that all truths are absolutely true and not merely relatively true. They too must earn through honest toil what a logic that entailed that all truths are absolutely so would obtain by theft. The second concern of the absolutists, regarding perspectives, is the bullet *they* must bite.

It should be emphasized that this solution forges a strict and important distinction between a proposition being true independently of any perspective and a proposition being true in all perspectives. The latter characterizes absolute truth, and carves out logical space for absolute truth even while permitting a robust relativist program. The former is an anti-relativism in that it rejects the idea of propositions being essentially indexed to perspectives. So, there are two ways an absolutist might go: deny that there are such things as perspectives and that truth is indexed to them, or admit that there are perspectives but maintain that the truth value (whatever it is) of any proposition is the same in every perspective. Absolutists are likely to be tempted by the former position, and deny the existence of perspectives at all. This is legitimate if the denial is the result of some argument, such as Davidson's argument against diverse conceptual schemes, but illegitimate as a preliminary move. That is, a haughty sneering in the direction of perspectives as an opening strategy is no more than a refusal by the absolutist even to come to the negotiating table. The relativist logic presented here is an attempt at rapprochement, a compromise that takes seriously the absolutist's demands for rigor and consistency. By comparison, it is hard to see how one might even meaningfully discuss contingency with a Spinozist who refuses possible worlds talk from the start. One is tempted not to try.

Treating relativism as a kind of modality provides a simple explanation of the criticism of self-refutation and a rigorous formulation of a relativist thesis that avoids the charge. This analysis also yields a simple and compelling refutation of an objection leveled by Newton-Smith. He writes that

> [One] might say … that it is propositions … that vary in truth-value [across perspectives]. But this is to take the short road to incoherence. For propositions are individuated in terms of truth-conditions. It is just incoherent to suppose that the same proposition could be true in Ψ and false in Φ. (Newton-Smith 1982, pp. 107–8)

This is plainly wrong. It is no more incoherent to relativize the truth of propositions to perspectives given a perspectivist semantics than it is to relativize the truth of propositions to possible worlds given a possible worlds semantics, or to relativize truth to languages given an array of languages.

I have argued that relativism can be made consistent if truth is relativized to perspectives in the same way that it is relativized to possible worlds in ordinary modal logic. To have a full logic of relativism, though, we will need another semantic notion, one analogous to the accessibility relation. To see why, let us first back up and ask why modal logic needs such a relation. The answer is that it is needed in order to provide flexibility about the kinds of necessity and possibility the formalism is able to represent. If we are only concerned with the widest sort of logical possibility, we can get along fine without an accessibility relation.[4] Yet it is useful to allow the machinery of modal logic to do more than simply model broadly logical possibility. Other sorts of possibility are interesting too—physical possibility, for example, or even possible chess moves at various stages in a game.

Physical possibility differs from broadly logical possibility in that fewer worlds are accessible from the actual world for the former than for the latter. The worlds additionally excluded when modeling physical possibility are those that are inaccessible from the actual world (i.e. physically impossible) given the physical laws of the actual world. For the class of the physically possible and impossible to change, the laws of the actual world would have to change. Put another way, were a person to become a member of an inaccessible world (i.e. a different possible world with physical laws different than those in this world), the things that are physically possible and impossible would change for that person. However, the prospects for packing up and moving to another possible world are not very good.

Much the same is true of relativism. A complete logic of relativism (such as that offered in the appendix) must be able to express various kinds of relativistic theses. One of the things that will distinguish relativisms of differing strengths is which perspectives are commensurable ones from a given perspective, and which are not. It is the commensurability relation that fills the role which accessibility fills for relativism. This may seem strange—relativists have traditionally talked about different perspectives being *incommensurable* to each other. For example, in detailing his conception of scientific relativism, Kuhn (1970) focuses on which scientific perspectives are incommensurable to which. He maintains that the perspective in which the caloric theory of heat is true is incommensurable to the perspective in which the kinetic theory is, the perspective of Ptolemaic astronomy is incommensurable to the Copernican one, and Newtonian physics is incommensurable to Einsteinian. However, thinking that there are differing incommensurable scientific perspectives should in no way lead us to think that there are not differing

[4] As argued in Plantinga (1974, pp. 51–4).

commensurable ones. For example, that Ptolemaic astronomy is incommensurable to Copernican astronomy does not preclude the possibility that Ptolemaic astronomy is commensurable to the perspective of Aristotelian physics. The set of perspectives commensurable to the perspective of Ptolemaic astronomy is simply the complement of the set of perspectives incommensurable to Ptolemaic astronomy.

On Kuhn's view, if a person were to enter into a scientific perspective incommensurable to his or her previous perspective, the class of available theories, solutions, and puzzles (and truths presumably, although Kuhn shies away from this final step) would change for that person. He thinks that, unlike the case of possible worlds, the prospects for packing up and moving to a previously incommensurable perspective are rather decent. This is where his discussion of crises and Gestalt switches comes into play. However, none of these features of Kuhn's theory should lead us to think that his scientific relativism cannot be captured or modeled by the logic of relativism developed here.

Suppose we tinker a bit with the range of the commensurability relation and compare the result with Kuhn's scientific relativism. Let's say that all scientific perspectives are commensurable with each other—the perspectives of Newtonian physics, Einsteinian physics, Copernican astronomy, Ptolemaic astronomy, etc. are all commensurable. However, scientific perspectives are incommensurable to religious perspectives. Thus modern cosmology is incommensurable to Old Testament cosmology, Darwinian biology is incommensurable to Christian creationism, and so on. To change from being a fundamentalist Christian to a thoroughgoing proponent of contemporary science requires a Gestalt-like paradigm shift. The same is true of the reverse: it takes a Gestalt switch to change from an atheistic scientific perspective to a deeply religious one. Now, one might argue that the sort of relativism sketched out here is not plausible, or not as plausible as Kuhn's, but it is plainly a coherent and at least somewhat intuitive alternative. It does not matter. The point is that just as changing the range of the accessibility relation changes the type of possibility being represented, so too it is through changing the range of the commensurability relation that the type of relativism being modeled changes.

What are commensurability and incommensurability anyway? Are they really connected with language and translatability as many have thought? There may well be a valuable notion of commensurability that has to do with languages and translatability.[5] However, no relativist adopting the relativist logic developed here need be concerned with this. In fact, there

[5] There are probably several distinct meanings that get assigned to "incommensurable". Cf. Wong (1989). Also see Putnam (1990, Ch. 8).

is no reason to be concerned with any kind of "analysis" of commensurability. The reason is that there *is* no deep fact about commensurability. The relation is invented to service the needs of the logic. To say that a perspective p' is commensurable to a perspective p is to say, roughly, that p' is a consistent or compatible perspective with p given certain facts about p. What these facts are will depend on the type of relativism that is being modeled. Compare: there is no deep fact about the accessibility relation that one ought to worry about discovering. That is, to say that a world w' is accessible from a world w only means that w' is a possible world relative to certain facts about w. What these facts are will depend on the type of possibility that is being modeled. For example, if the sort of possibility being represented is "possible moves of my rook in this chess game", the salient facts will be the rules of chess, the position of the pieces in this game, and whose move it is. The point is that accessibility was invented to explain or account for this type of relative possibility. It is just a concept that is designed to play a role in the logic of possibility and necessity. It is certainly not a concept "out in the world", one that is part of our ordinary stock of concepts, or one that merits conceptual investigation. So too with commensurability. It is a concept that exists by design, whose sole nature is consumed by the function or role that it plays in the logic of relativism.

III

What about the other semantic notion a relativist logic requires, namely the idea of a perspective? I have little to add to the remarks of others by way of an intuitive presentation. Despite the famed unclarity of the idea of a perspective, most philosophers seem to have a grasp of it. Michael Krausz and Jack W. Meiland write

> [The notion of a perspective] is so pervasive in our intellectual life that it is a major element in the thinking of philosophers who are in other respects radically different from one another. For example, the neopositivist Rudolf Carnap speaks of "linguistic frameworks"; the neo-Kantian C.I. Lewis speaks of "networks of categories"; and the later Wittgenstein talks about "forms of life." But they are all talking about conceptual schemes in a broader or narrower sense of that expression. (Krausz and Meiland 1982, editors' introduction, pp. 7–8.)

Many others, including Rescher, Goodman, Kuhn, Whorf and Nietzsche might be added to this list. Indeed, the idea that there is a feminist perspective or an African-American one is the commonest currency of contemporary philosophy. Yet perhaps all these writers are mistaken in thinking that

the concept of a perspective is a cogent one. Let us consider for a moment Davidson's famous criticism of the intelligibility of diverse conceptual schemes. His argument goes something like this:

1. Commensurability is to be understood in terms of translatability; incommensurability is to be understood in terms of untranslatability.[6]
2. Conceptual schemes are to be individuated in terms of incommensurability (but not commensurability). That is, only incommensurability divides conceptual schemes. There cannot be two diverse yet commensurable perspectives.[7]
3. There is no such thing as untranslatability.
4. Thus there is no such thing as incommensurability.
5. Thus nothing separates conceptual schemes.
6. With no way of individuating perspectives, there is no reason to accept their existence.

I am happy to agree that his conclusions 4–6 follow from his premises. Premise 3 is the one Davidson spends the bulk of his essay defending, and I grant it for the sake of argument. It is premises 1 and 2 that must be rejected. I have already argued that the commensurability relation (and hence incommensurability) is best understood as a stipulative relation that simply plays a functional role in the logic of relativism. To be sure, Davidson has fine historical grounds for interpreting commensurability the way he does. Nevertheless, relativists are not obliged to buy into varieties of commensurability that involve translatability or other sorts of heavier theoretical baggage. Premise 2 claims that without incommensurability there is no way to make decent sense out of the notion of a perspective. Again, historical reasons aside, there is little motivation to accept this. Compare: the concept of a possible world is perfectly intelligible without, and was intelligible long before the advent of, an accessibility relation. Likewise it is hard to see why Davidson will only allow *in*commensurability between perspectives. Just as we are willing to agree that there are possible worlds that are both non-identical with the actual world and yet accessible from the actual world, so too we should admit perspectives commensurable to (yet non-identical with) one's actual perspective. The upshot is that Davidson's insistence on hitching the viability of perspectives to translatability issues is unnecessary and

[6] "'Incommensurable' is, of course, Kuhn and Feyerabend's word for 'not intertranslatable'" (Davidson 1984, p. 190).

[7] "Studying the criteria of translation is … a way of focusing on criteria of identity for conceptual schemes" (Davidson 1984, p. 190). "The failure of intertranslatability is a necessary condition for difference of conceptual schemes …" (Davidson 1984, p. 184).

misleading. Once that move is rejected, his argument may be safely set aside.

I propose that we treat perspectives in the same manner as possible worlds—viz. as abstract intensional objects. Merely trotting out the Quinean chestnut about intensions being creatures of darkness (Quine 1976) is not enough to dismiss this approach. So far we have seen that there is much to be gained by treating relativism as a kind of modality analogous to possibility and necessity. Taking perspectives as abstracta is the natural continuation of this analogy. Opinions vary tremendously as to what possible worlds are—sets of propositions, states of affairs, properties, etc.[8] Still, this deliberation does not mean that there are no possible worlds, or that we should be skeptics about possible world semantics. Similarly we should not take a lack of nice and neat individuation criteria for perspectives as sufficient grounds for skepticism. As Swoyer notes (1982, p. 88), we are happy to accept many concepts (games and tables, for example) for which reductive analyses are not easily found.

Alternatively one might argue that, given the similarities between perspectives and possible worlds, perhaps there is no difference between the two. Maybe relativism is just another manifestation of ordinary alethic modality. This objection raises a good question (viz. what are the ontological differences between possible worlds and perspectives?) but gives a bad answer (viz. there are not any). The considerations that motivate the belief in possible worlds are completely distinct from those that motivate the belief in perspectives. A skeptic about perspectives will need to do much more work to show that these two concepts are "really the same" or that one is reducible to the other.

IV

Philip Percival has recently argued that there is a conceptual difficulty with relativism other than the usual self-refuting kind.[9] It is worthwhile to show how his concern is not telling against the relativist logic offered here. Percival's main argument is that there is no "clear statement of [relativism's] consequences for the evaluation of utterances", and thus "it is empty and worthless" (p. 208). In explaining this charge, Percival makes it plain that he is concerned with how to resolve a conflict over the truth of a proposition between two parties who (apparently) disagree. If a per-

[8] For a few of these opinions, see the essays in Loux (1979). Also see Chisholm (1989) and Lewis (1986).

[9] See Percival (1994). Subsequent page numbers refer to this article.

son *A* believes that proposition *P* is true, whereas *B* believes it to be false, Percival claims that *B*'s belief obliges her "to insist that *A* withdraw his utterance" (p. 209). So far so good. The problem, thinks Percival, arises if *A* holds *P* to be true relative to some perspective *Y* and *B* rejects *P* relative to some different perspective *Z*, for "how can I believe both that the aims given *A*, for him, by the language he employs were successfully pursued, and that I have every right to force him to withdraw his utterance?" (p. 209).

The answer is that he cannot. Percival's problem only arises if one presupposes an absolutist conception of truth. His mistake is in thinking that under relativism, *B* is really obliged to insist that *A* change his mind about *P*. If *P* is merely relatively true, then *A*'s assertion of *P* can, given his perspective, be a successful speech act, and *B*'s assertion of not-*P* can, given her perspective, also be a successful speech act. The conflict between *A* and *B* is merely illusory; they are in fact debating at cross-purposes. There is genuine disagreement only if both *A* and *B* adopt the same perspective with regard to *P*. It is clearly an option of the relativism I present that two people could adopt the same perspective, although a possibility Percival oddly fails to recognize.

Our preanalytic intuitions about the nature of disagreement are notoriously unreliable, and Percival should not lean too heavily on them. There are clear cases in which one would think that two parties have engaged in successful speech acts and still disagree. For example, suppose *A* claims "I like eggplant" and *B* asserts "I do not like eggplant". In one sense there is a real disagreement (in taste) between them. Nevertheless this does not oblige *B* "to insist that *A* withdraw his utterence". Relativists hold that all statements have a similar indexical character; they are indexed to perspectives that people may or may not share.

As far as the matter of the evaluation of a truth claim under relativism, such a claim can only be properly evaluated once the perspective in which it is made is established. It is true that the issue of what exactly a perspective is and how one is identified arises at this point. I have already stated that explicating this is a key task faced by relativists. Yet the fact that there is some mystery attaching to perspectives hardly makes relativism "empty and worthless", as Percival thinks. All of philosophy would be empty and worthless if every concept with a bit of mystery were thus rejected. Moreover, there is some explanation at hand in the analogy with possible worlds. Propositions are to be evaluated with respect to perspectives in the same way, formally, as they are to possible worlds. Percival also finds the matter of possible worlds obscure (pp. 210–1), but if relativism is no worse off than possible worlds semantics, then much has been accomplished.

Still, there are many questions about relativism that are unanswered in this essay. Are the motivations for relativism linguistic, like the motivations for alethic modality (as suggested perhaps by the work of Whorf), or are they due to extra-linguistic reflections (as suggested perhaps by the work of Kuhn or Goodman)? What *is* a perspective? Is relativism really needed as a theory of truth anyway? These are challenging questions that merit serious attention. Nevertheless, the logic of relativism developed in this paper has several important payoffs. It shows that we can clearly and rigorously understand truth as relative and truth as absolute and see that they are not mutually exclusive. It shows that the commensurability relation is not problematic and mysterious, but just an explanatory tool on a par with accessibility. It provides a way to avoid Davidson's criticisms of the very idea of a conceptual scheme. Yet these are mostly happy side effects. Most importantly, the theory developed in this paper resolves the 2500-year-old charge that global relativism is self-refuting. It is entirely consistent for a relativist to assert that whatever is true is relatively true and that whatever is false is relatively false. This is a kind of compromise position, and no one likes a compromise. Relativists must accept that the strongest logically consistent relativism will include some absolute truths (e.g. the axioms and theorems of RL), and absolutists must countenance an ontology that includes perspectives. Hopefully the disputants will prefer détente to dogmatism, move past the ancient debate about self-refutation, and proceed to other pressing matters concerning relativism.

Formal Appendix

We can define the two perspectival operators rigorously, and add them to ordinary predicate modal logic as follows.

LANGUAGE RL[10]

I. Primitive symbols:

(1) An infinite set SEN of sentence letters {p, q, r, …}
(2) An infinite set VAR of variables {x, y, z, …}
(3) An infinite set CON of constants {a, b, c, …}
(4) An infinite set PRD of predicate letters {F, G, H, …}
(5) Grouping signs ( ) and ,
(6) The connectives &, ¬, ∨, ↔, →

[10] The presentation of this system is based on the superb work of Gamut (1991).

(7) The quantifiers $\exists$ and $\forall$

(8) The modal operators $\Box$ and $\Diamond$

(9) The perspectival operators $\blacksquare$ and $\blacklozenge$

II. Syntax for RL:

(1) If $p \in$ SEN then $p \in WFF_{RL}$ (where the set WFF_{RL} contains all and only well-formed formulas of RL)

(2) If $F^n \in$ PRD (where the superscript n denotes the adicity of F) and ($\alpha, \beta, \ldots \in$ VAR or $\alpha, \beta, \ldots \in$ CON) then $F\alpha, \beta, \ldots \in WFF_{RL}$

(3) If $\Phi, \Psi \in WFF_{RL}$ then $\neg\Phi$, $(\Phi \vee \Psi)$, $(\Phi \& \Psi)$, $(\Phi \rightarrow \Psi)$, and $(\Phi \leftrightarrow \Psi) \in WFF_{RL}$

(4) If $\Phi \in WFF_{RL}$ and $x \in$ VAR then $\exists x\Phi$, $\forall x\Phi \in WFF_{RL}$

(5) If $\Phi \in WFF_{RL}$ then $\Diamond \Phi$, $\Box \Phi \in WFF_{RL}$

(6) If $\Phi \in WFF_{RL}$ then $\blacklozenge\Phi$, $\blacksquare\Phi \in WFF_{RL}$

(7) Every element of WFF_{RL} is constructed in a finite number of steps using (1)–(6).

III. Semantics for RL:

A model M for language RL consists of the following six things.

(1) A nonempty set W of possible worlds

(2) A nonempty set P of perspectives

(3) An accessibility relation R_p on W

The subscript "p" represents a perspectival parameter on the accessibility relation. It effectively means that the model allows the accessibility of worlds to each other to vary from perspective to perspective. Thus $R_p ww'$ means that w' is accessible from w given perspective p. This indexing makes the alethic modalities relative to perspectives, and thus permits the claim that necessity is perspectival.[11] This parameter might be abandoned while still maintaining a robust relativism. To do so would mean that the same worlds are accessible at a world no matter what perspective is chosen.

(4) A commensurability relation C on P

(5) A domain function D_p which assigns a domain $D_{p,w}$ to each world $w \in W$

Here the perspective parameter relativizes what there is to perspectives. In our world, for example, from the perspective of extreme Platonism there are many abstract objects. From the perspective of nominalism there are none.

(6) An interpretation function I_p which assigns

(i) an entity $I_p(\alpha)$ to each $\alpha \in$ CON

(ii) a subset $I_{p,w}(F^n)$ of $D_{p,w}{}^n$ for each $F^n \in$ PRD

[11] A claim made, for example, by Nietzsche (1968, §552 and 556).

That is, given a perspective, a world, and an n-adic predicate F, the function $I_{p,w}(F^n)$ specifies the extension for F at that world given perspective p. The perspective parameter will ensure, for example, that at our world the extension of the predicate "is at the center of the universe" will be one thing in the Copernican perspective and something else in the Ptolemaic perspective. Also, in (6ii), $D_{p,w}$ is raised to power n for the following reason. The extensions of n-adic predicates are ordered sets of n-tuples. The elements of these sets will be provided by the Cartesian products of $D_{p,w}$. The extension of a dyadic predicate with respect to world w and perspective p will be a subset of $D_{p,w} \times D_{p,w}$; the extension of a triadic predicate a subset of $D_{p,w} \times D_{p,w} \times D_{p,w}$; etc.

Let M be a model, $\Phi \in WFF_{RL}$, $w \in W$, $p \in P$, and g be a variable assignment. Also let

$$[t]_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g} = I_p(t) \text{ if t is a constant}$$
$$= g(t) \text{ if t is a variable}$$

We can then provide a truth definition as follows: $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Phi)$ (that is, the truth value of sentence Φ in world w, given perspective p and model M, and any arbitrary variable assignment g) is:

(i) $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(Ft_1 \ldots t_n) = 1$ iff $[t_1]_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g} \in D_{p,w}, \ldots, [t_n]_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g} \in D_{p,w}$ and $\langle [t_1]_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}, \ldots, [t_n]_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g} \rangle \in I_{p,w}(F)$
$= 0$ iff $[t_1]_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g} \in D_{p,w}, \ldots, [t_n]_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g} \in D_{p,w}$ and $\langle [t_1]_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}, \ldots, [t_n]_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g} \rangle \notin I_{p,w}(F)$

(ii) $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\neg\Phi) =$ iff $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Phi) = 0$
$= 0$ iff $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Phi) = 1$

(iii) $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Phi \rightarrow \Psi) = 0$ iff $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Phi) = 1$ and $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Psi) = 0$
$= 1$ iff $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Phi) = 1$ and $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Psi) = 1$
or $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Phi) = 0$ and $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Psi) = 1$
or $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Phi) = 0$ and $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Psi) = 0$

(iv) $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\forall x\Phi) = 1$ iff for every $d \in D_{p,w}$: $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g[x/d]}(\Phi) = 1$
$= 0$ iff there is a $d \in D_{p,w}$ such that $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g[x/d]}(\Phi) = 0$

The notation g[x/d] refers to the specific variable assignment of the value d to the variable x.

(v) $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\Box\Phi) = 1$ iff for every $w' \in W$ such that $R_p ww'$: $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w',g}(\Phi) = 1$
$= 0$ iff there is a $w' \in W$ such that $R_p ww'$: $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w',g}(\Phi) = 0$

(vi) $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\blacksquare\Phi) = 1$ iff for every $p' \in P$ such that Cpp': $V_{\mathbf{M},p',w,g}(\Phi) = 1$

$= 0$ iff there is a $p' \in P$ such that Cpp': $V_{\mathbf{M},p',w,g}(\Phi) = 0$

(vii) $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\blacklozenge\Phi) = 1$ iff there is a $p' \in P$ such that Cpp': $V_{\mathbf{M},p',w,g}(\Phi) = 1$

$= 0$ iff for every $p' \in P$ such that Cpp': $V_{\mathbf{M},p',w,g}(\Phi) = 0$

The clauses for the connectives &, $\vee$, and $\leftrightarrow$ follow from the above clauses along with the usual definitions for those connectives in terms of $\neg$ and $\rightarrow$. The clauses for $\Diamond$ and $\exists$ likewise follow from the above clauses plus their usual definitions in terms of $\Box$ and $\neg$, and $\forall$ and $\neg$, respectively. The clauses in the truth definition for both of the perspectival operators are given explicitly.

It should be noted that, as in the case of $\exists$ and $\forall$, and $\Diamond$ and $\Box$, the perspectival operators are truth-functional duals. That is, $\blacksquare\Phi \Leftrightarrow \neg \blacklozenge \neg \Phi$, and also $\blacklozenge\Phi \Leftrightarrow \neg \blacksquare \neg \Phi$. Thus, saying that a sentence Φ is absolutely true is equivalent to saying that it cannot be true in some perspective that not-Φ. This accords well with our intuitions. If it is the case that Φ is absolutely true in perspective p, this means that it is true in all perspectives commensurable to p. Thus there can be no perspective commensurable to p in which not-Φ is true. Compare Nietzsche's remark (1968, §522) that "rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off". This reflects his view that humans cannot live without interpreting their experience in a logical way. That is, logic is essential to human life, and so the laws of logic are absolutely true for humans. Now, in non-human perspectives, whatever they may be, things could be different. So if we specify the commensurability relation so that the range of C is all human perspectives, Nietzsche's position is that every $p' \in P$ such that Cpp': $V_{\mathbf{M},p',w,g}$(the laws of logic)= 1. Plainly, then, it cannot be relatively true (keeping the range of C fixed, of course) that the laws of logic fail to hold. Thus it follows that $\blacksquare\Phi \Leftrightarrow \neg \blacklozenge \neg \Phi$.

It is also important to show how principle P, viz., that $\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi \Rightarrow \blacksquare\Phi$, relates to language RL. It is this principle, recall, that turned out to be at the root of the self-refutation problem for "everything is relative". P is a theorem of RL as long as C is symmetrical and transitive. Here's the proof. Suppose that $\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi$ is true. This means that $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi) = 1$. According to clause (vii) in the semantics for RL, $V_{\mathbf{M},p,w,g}(\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi) = 1$ iff there is a $p' \in P$ such that Cpp': $V_{\mathbf{M},p',w,g}(\blacksquare\Phi) = 1$. That is, loosely speaking, $\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi$ is true at a perspective p just in case there is some perspective p' that is commensurable with p and such that $\blacksquare\Phi$ is true at p'. Given the truth of $\blacklozenge\blacksquare\Phi$ at p, we know that $\blacksquare\Phi$ is true at p'. In turn, the fact that $\blacksquare\Phi$ is true at p' means that Φ is true at every perspective commensurable to p'. Suppose that p is commensurable to p'. We already know that Cpp'.

Suppose now that Cp′p—i.e. that the commensurability relation is symmetrical. This establishes that, given the truth of ◆■Φ at a perspective p, Φ is also true at p. But the task at hand is to show the truth of ■Φ at p. To get this, we need to further suppose that the commensurability relation is transitive. This can be expressed as ■Φ→■ ■Φ.[12] In other words, given the truth of ■Φ in perspective p′, we can get the truth of ■Φ in all perspectives commensurable to p′. On our prior assumption of symmetry, ■Φ turns out to be true in our original perspective p. Thus ◆■Φ ⇒ ■Φ in RL under the assumptions that C is symmetrical and transitive.[13]

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[12] See Gamut (1991, p. 26) for an explanation of why this expresses transitivity.

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