I

Realism and relativism are among the oldest positions in philosophy, and I think that debates between them are among its oldest and, arguably, most fruitful debates. Since Protogoras, who famously claimed that man is the measure of all things, many philosophers have been suspicious of the central claim of truth absolutism, the claim that all statements, if true, are absolutely true. Only few philosophers, however, followed Protagoras’ radical dictum that all statements are only relatively true which, if applied to itself, seems somehow to lead to dialectical incoherence. So many philosophers, though they typically reject global relativism, adopt local versions of truth relativism, relativism about specific domains of discourse or subject matters. Consequently, the form of truth relativism, or alethic relativism, they endorse is that many, or at least some statements are only relatively true. For example, one might maintain that the statements of mathematics are absolutely true, while typical statements of the empirical sciences are only relatively true. It is evident that relativistic theses will be more plausible about some subject matters than about others. We all agree that Einstein made the most important of all relativistic discoveries, the discovery namely, that statements about the motion of objects and about their mass as well as statements about the simultaneity of events are only relatively true, true in relation to a variable frame of reference.
To gain an understanding of the dialectical relationship between realism and relativism, it is helpful to begin with a characterization of the traditional philosophical debate between realism and anti-realism. It is helpful to begin this way because, as we will see, anti-realism seems to be a necessary presupposition of any serious form of relativism. In this context, I will also introduce another important philosophical figure, the epistemological skeptic.

The basic idea of realism about a particular domain can be roughly expressed as a conjunction of two theses, an existence thesis and an independence thesis: firstly the kinds of thing distinctive of that domain exist, and secondly their existence and nature are objective and independent of us, of our perceptions, thoughts and language. The things within the domain must be out there to be discovered rather than constructed or constituted by our minds or our conceptual schemes. Anti-realism rejects this conjunction of theses. Some forms of anti-realism attack the existence thesis by flatly denying that entities of the relevant kind really exist, while according to other forms entities of the relevant kind do exist but are not objective or have no independent status in reality.

Like relativism, realism and anti-realism are domain-specific positions. There are distinct categories of entities one can be realist or anti-realist about: physical objects, universals, mental states, space, time, moral values, God, numbers, meaning, and so on. Most philosophers are neither global realists nor global anti-realists. Rather, most of them are pickers and choosers, local realists about some kind of entities, and local anti-realists about others.

Let us take a look at the traditional debate between realism and anti-realism about the external, physical world, that is, the debate about whether physical objects and events exist independently of the mental. Realists maintain that there really are mountains, rivers and stars, and that their existence and nature, what they are like, are constitutively independent of what anyone happens to believe or say about the matter. Usually anti-realists do not dispute that there are such things. Quite the contrary, they maintain that, of course, everyday macroscopic objects do indeed exist but, so they typically add, not objectively, not independently of us. Rather, they contend, their existence is somehow relative to some conceptual scheme or framework or paradigm.
Realism and anti-realism, as so far characterized, are ontological or metaphysical theses. It is often suggested, however, that this characterization should be supplemented to include an epistemological thesis. Two proposals, not incompatible but highlighting different aspects of our epistemic situation, can be distinguished. Some realists, the epistemological optimists, claim that we are mostly capable of acquiring knowledge about the objective world; they are persuaded that, difficult as it may be, the world is principally epistemically accessible to us.\(^1\) Other realists, however, the epistemological pessimists, are a bit more cautious in this regard.\(^2\) They tend to stress the ever-present possibility of error and ignorance. There is no guarantee that our beliefs about the world, even if they are maximally supported by evidence, are true. Truth about the world, so they characteristically contend, is always potentially evidence-transcendent or verification-transcendent.

The crucial point is that, according to realism, there is a logical gap between our beliefs about the world, or our sensory experiences of it, and the way the world is in itself. The totality of our beliefs about the world is one thing, the objective world quite another; obviously, our believing something to be so-and-so, does not make it so. This basic realist conviction, apparently a platitude acknowledged by both naive and reflective common sense, is the main reason why many philosophers think that realism is threatened by a deep internal tension: if the world is constitutionally independent of our experiences and beliefs, then how can we be confident of gaining any knowledge about it?

While the camp of the so-called epistemological realists seeks to combine its ontological thesis of the mind-independence of the world with the epistemological thesis that it is nevertheless humanly possible to gain knowledge about it, epistemological skeptics resolve the apparent tension in realism in a quite different way: they assert that it is impossible to know anything about the external, objective world at all; we can attain knowledge, at most, only of our minds and its ideas or representations. This is the standpoint of skepticism about the external world. We can know neither that there is an external world nor, should there be one, what it is like.

In this dialectical situation anti-realists and relativists of various stripes –

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idealists, verificationists, phenomenalists, Kantians, social constructivists etc. – enter the stage. Deeply convinced that metaphysical realism opens the door to skepticism, anti-realists argue that the realist conception of an independent world behind the appearances, beyond the world as we perceive it and believe it to be, is wrong or even incoherent. They often urge that there are significant connections between understanding and verification, which the skeptic simply ignores. The only world there is, the only world we can find out about, is the world our senses present to us. A hypothesis with no connection to experience is regarded as spurious; after all, it could never be verified or falsified. So anti-realists tend to assert that we cannot even understand the skeptic’s speculations about the wildly different ways the world might really be, even though all our experiences remain unaltered. According to anti-realism, there is indeed an ordinary perceptible world, a world of trees, tables, and stars, but this world is, in a philosophically significant sense, dependent on, or constituted by, or relative to, our epistemic activities. So what the anti-realists are willing to abandon is the distinctive realist conception of the world as what is there anyway, the alleged objectivity and autonomy of the world. To block skepticism, they offer us a revisionary ontology, which marks a considerable departure from the deeply entrenched metaphysics of common sense.

The skeptic, on the other hand, need not deny the existence of an independent world. She is an agnostic, who merely claims that we do not know whether or not such an objective world, a world as the realist conceives it, really exists. To achieve her aim, it is enough to raise reasonable doubts about our beliefs concerning the external world, thereby seeking to show that we are not justified in holding these beliefs, and so do not know that they are true. Anti-realism is a drastic reaction to skepticism; it is a radical form of anti-skepticism. Our knowledge of the world is unproblematic and secure because it seems to be not very difficult to know what is going on in our own minds – in our subjective or internal world.

The fundamental realist conviction that the facts of the world are not bound to be what we take them to be is often expressed as a thesis about the relation between truth and justification: our beliefs about the objective world, even if they were maximally supported by evidence, might still be false. Truth, for the realist, is a radically non-epistemic notion, and

so the truth of our beliefs about the world is always potentially evidence-transcendent. As Rudolf Carnap pointed out some time ago, truth is one thing, justification another.\(^4\)

Some realists, and I am among them, are persuaded that the best way to explicate their conception of truth is to embrace a version of the correspondence theory of truth whose central thesis is that a proposition is true just in case there is a fact to which it corresponds, and false just in case it does not correspond to a fact. According to them, truth is, basically, a dyadic relationship between a truth bearer – a statement or belief – and a truth maker, a reality that has an objective status with respect to the truth bearer. Truth makers are familiar entities: objects having certain properties and standing in certain relations to each other at various spatiotemporal locations. Further, they think that truth can be explained by objective referential relationships between language and the thought expressed on the one hand and the external world on the other.\(^5\) Such a referential explication, then, allows us to develop a plausible form of the correspondence theory of truth that can take the intuitive idea seriously that a statement is true if and only if the fact or state of affairs actually obtains whose obtaining is asserted by the statement. Correspondence does not require something as pretentious as a relation of structural isomorphism between statements and facts, as early Ludwig Wittgenstein und Bertrand Russell once thought.\(^6\) Ordinary reference is enough.

The fact that tomatoes are red is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the truth of the statement that tomatoes are red. It is true that \(p\) if and only if \(p\). Facts, as I see them, are not completely artificial, “sentence-shaped” objects, mere shadows cast by our linguistic practice of making statements, as Peter Strawson and Donald Davidson suggest.\(^7\) And facts are not true thoughts either, as Gottlob Frege contended.\(^8\) Rather, facts are components of the objective, mind-independent spatiotemporal world. Neither the existence nor the nature of facts depends, in any philosophically significant sense, on what we believe, think or perceive. Moreover, an essential element of the realist view is that truth transcends verifiability, that a statement can be true even though we, beings with

\(^4\) Cf. Carnap 1935.
\(^6\) Cf. Wittgenstein 1922, Russell 1912.
\(^7\) Cf. Strawson 1950, Davidson 1990.
\(^8\) Cf. Frege 1919.
our sensory and cognitive nature, are not at all able to verify it. Truth and objective reality cannot be reduced to what we are able to ascertain. Truth, according to alethic realism, is evidence-transcendent; it exceeds rational acceptability.  

But, actually, realists need not espouse a detailed form of the correspondence theory of truth. It is also open to them to adopt a version of the so-called deflationary or minimalist conception of truth, and many contemporary realists do so. The central claim of deflationism is that the various attempts of traditional philosophers to analyze the inner nature of truth were misguided, and thus must be deflated. Truth, on the deflationary account, has no underlying nature. Hence the concept of truth is not a philosophically contentious concept, not a concept that stands for a substantial or robust property or relation. On the contrary, on their view truth is a purely formal or logical concept, a concept whose correct explanation requires far less extravagant conceptual resources than adherents of substantive theories believe. This is so, they claim, because propositions expressed by sentences of the form “The proposition that p is true” are logically equivalent to the proposition expressed by p itself. Consequently, the whole content of the truth-predicate is given by the totality of appropriate instances of the conceptually fundamental equivalence schema “The proposition that p is true if and only if p”. The parallelism with Alfred Tarski’s famous equivalences of “form T”: “X (the sentence ‘p’) is true if and only if p” is obvious.

The crucial point, for the realist, is that the deflationary perspective shares the idea that the truth of a belief about the world depends on the way the world is, and thus is, in at least a minimal sense, a matter of correspondence or fitting the facts. Truth is, both for the authentic correspondence theorist and for the deflationist, a radically non-epistemic concept, a concept without any conceptual connections to verification, justification or other epistemic notions. Anti-realists and relativists tend to overlook the option of connecting realism with a deflationary account of truth. Commonly, the target of their assaults is the traditional combination of realism with a robust correspondence theory of truth.

The central realist idea, however, that truth is an epistemically unconstrained concept, has quite often been regarded as an entering wedge for
a variant of the skeptical challenge. The objection is often raised that if the truth of a belief does not in any way depend on an internal trait of it, such as its epistemic status, but only on a relation to something external, a transcendent fact in the objective world, then the tie between justification and truth is severed. On the realist view, so it is often argued, the criterion of truth and the nature of truth seem to be torn apart, with the disastrous consequence that it becomes impossible to determine whether our beliefs are true. This is supposed to be so because in order to determine whether a belief is true we would have to determine whether it corresponds to a fact. But we cannot compare a belief with reality because there is no direct, conceptually unmediated grasp of facts or objects which we are simply given to our consciousness. All our epistemic states are conceptually structured and have a propositional content. Thus, in attempting to apprehend the external side of the correspondence relation, we find ourselves with just another belief and so end up comparing a belief with a different belief ¾ even if it is a perceptual belief. We can never get outside the circle of our beliefs to inspect the independent facts that are supposed to make our beliefs true.

I have scrutinized and rejected this argument elsewhere and defended the intuitive standpoint that we are indeed capable of comparing our beliefs with the facts.\textsuperscript{11} Why is such a comparison supposed to be impossible? I have found no compelling reason for this supposition. Indeed I think that no mysterious feat is required for comparing our beliefs with the world. Often it seems to be supposed that realism requires something like a pure, unmediated presentation of facts to our awareness in order to be viable. But realism requires no such thing. All that is required are commonly accepted methods for acquiring knowledge. It doesn’t matter how we come to know the facts. What is essential is only that we do come to know them. I believe we have, under standard conditions, through perception a direct cognitive access to external facts, an access that enables us to ascertain whether or not these facts render our beliefs true. But the directness or immediacy is not really essential. To determine whether the statement that \( p \) corresponds to a fact we just have to determine whether \( p \) – no matter how, whether directly or by more or less indirect routes, such as induction and inference to the best explanation. Thus realism,

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. Schantz 1999.
even in combination with the correspondence theory, by no means leads to the absurd conclusion that beliefs and judgments are the only things to which we have a cognitive access.

III

So far I have portrayed realism with respect to the physical world in space and time and defended this position against an extremely influential epistemologically motivated anti-realist and relativistic objection. Let us now turn to areas where the prospects for anti-realist and relativistic convictions seem to be much brighter. These are areas where the realist conception of a realm of absolute, mind-independent facts that might exceed the limits of humanly attainable knowledge and the closely related conception of truth as epistemically unconstrained seem much less plausible or even quite bizarre. Such areas seem to abound.

Many philosophers have defended relativistic views about subject matters which have a certain normative character, such as ethics, aesthetics and epistemic justification, and even more philosophers are convinced that a form of relativism about judgements of taste, about what Crispin Wright in a judicious article nicely calls “disputes of inclination”\textsuperscript{12} simply must be right. Take the statement “Chilli is delicious”. One might come to think that this statement is true relative to some person’s standard of taste, or perspective, and false relative to another person’s culinary standard. We seem to be faced with a genuine disagreement, with incompatible attitudes in that one person affirms something that is inconsistent with what another person affirms. But neither of them seems to be wrong or at fault with regard to the basic norms to evaluate acts of assertion of these kinds. It is not the case that their assertions are equally justified, on the basis of the evidence available to them, although at most one of them is true. Relativism is not an epistemological stance, but a metaphysical stance. The reasons for the irresolvability of the disagreement are not epistemic but metaphysical reasons. They do not lie in our limitations to know the relevant facts. Rather, the relativist proclaims, there just are no relevant facts waiting to be discovered.

Many philosophers are so fascinated by the idea of faultless disagree-

\textsuperscript{12} Wright 2006, p. 38.
ment that they have attempted to extend it to other allegedly non-objective areas such as morality, aesthetics, justification and, much more controversial, even to theoretical science and ontology. So we have good reason to throw a careful glance at this apparently forceful thought. Faultless disagreement can be characterized as a conjunction of two theses: Firstly, there can be inconsistent statements about the same subject matter which, secondly, are nevertheless equally correct, so that nobody need be in error. That sounds somehow puzzling. Indeed, if appearances are taken at face value, the idea seems even to be incoherent. The propositions the disputing parties assert cannot both be true, for that would be an outright violation of the law of non-contradiction. The point is pretty simple. Suppose that A asserts p, and B asserts not-p. Now assume further, as requested, that both assertions are correct. But if p is true, then B’s assertion is false, and if not-p is true, then A’s assertion is false. Hence both assertions cannot be correct. It seems that disagreements have to be conceived as ordinary disagreements in which at most one participant can be right. Obviously, however, ordinary disagreements are of no help to the relativist, since everybody is prepared to recognize them.

Of course, the relativist does not want to be committed to allowing exceptions to the law of non-contradiction. So in order to neutralize this serious objection, some philosophers have proposed a conception of relative truth. The truth or falsity of beliefs, or of the propositions that are their contents, are not absolute but, rather, must be relativized to certain parameters.

To get a grip on the idea, let us consider the sentence type “It is raining”. According to standard semantics, this sentence does not express a complete proposition or truth-conditional content. It is particular utterances of this sentence type that do express complete and determinate propositions because, when uttered in specific contexts, they express propositions of the form “It is raining at location l at time t”, where the values of l and t are determined by the context of the utterance. We can say that utterances of the first sentence are elliptical for utterances of the expanded sentence. So, on the standard semantic account, the truth of an utterance of “It is raining” is relative to the context of utterance because the proposition expressed, what is said, by such an utterance is relative to the context in which it is made. Hence one utterance, when made in London at t₁, would express the proposition that it is raining in London at t₁, while
another utterance, made in Paris at $t_2$, would express the proposition that it is raining in Paris at $t_2$. And, of course, one of these utterances might be true, and the other false.

In an influential article, John Perry claims that the content of “It is raining” is not a complete proposition but a propositional function, true of some places and false of others. The place is not determined by the literal semantic content of an utterance of this sentence type but, rather, by the situation in which the utterance comes off. His leading idea is that the proposition expressed by an utterance may contain “unarticulated constituents”, constituents which are unrepresented in the overt syntax of the sentence uttered. The sentence as a whole is about the unarticulated constituent, even though this element does not correspond to any part of the sentence. Perry maintains that unless the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of this sentence contained a place, the proposition would be incomplete, and hence, would not be truth evaluable. Moreover, he goes on to argue that unarticulated constituents are not even represented at the level of the deep syntax; the sentences contain no hidden indexical expression that refers to the location. But this point is more controversial. Fortunately, we do not have to enter into this thorny debate here.

What is important is that by now it is widely recognized that no satisfactory semantic theory can ignore the role of contexts in which expressions are used and interpreted. In recent years, a lot of powerful machinery has been developed by philosophers of language, philosophical logicians and theoretical linguists for the scientific study of contexts and the discourses that take place in them. The times when context-dependence was regarded as a defect of natural languages are over. Rather, many authors presently talk about the “dynamic turn” in the semantics of natural languages. Consequently, the interface between semantics and pragmatics has become a significant field of linguistic research. So Jon Barwise and John Perry have developed a relation theory of meaning, “situation semantics”, which represents the meaning of a simple declarative sentence as a relation between situations, between an utterance on the one hand, and a described situation on the other. The interpretation of a statement

made with such a sentence on a certain occasion is the described situation. And Hans Kamp developed the theoretical framework of the “Discourse Representation Theory”, which extends Richard Montague’s pioneering model-theoretical approach so as to be capable of doing justice to the semantic dependencies among different sentences in a discourse and to provide interpretations not only of individual sentences, but also of discourses as wholes. In this respect Discourse Representation Theory marks a clear break with received formal semantics.

Hence nowadays, formal semantics and philosophy of language incorporate the crucial insight that the propositional content of an assertive utterance is underdetermined by the linguistic meaning, or the semantic content, of the sentence uttered. The information a context-sensitive sentence conveys goes well beyond its conventional significance. Additional content-determining factors have to be taken into account to complete the content, such as, first and foremost, objective features of the context of utterance, such as the speaker, audience, place and time. But the content-determining factors also include general conversational rules and background assumptions known to be shared by the participants in a conversation. Very often, obvious facts about the conversational context interact with the meaning of the sentence uttered to determine the proposition expressed. We have to recognize that what is said by the utterance of a sentence in a context is also contingent upon the context of interpretation. It is an important fact that the propositional content of an assertive utterance of a sentence depends both upon the context of utterance and the context of interpretation.

Let us call this basic position “contextualist semantics”, or simply “contextualism”. Some authors call it “expressive relativism” or ”content relativism”. The only thing that is relative, according to contextualism, is propositional or truth-conditional content. But these contextually determined contents have absolute truth-values. This is surely the mainstream view, and, on this view, truth is not relative in any philosophically interesting sense.

In contrast to contextualists or content relativists, truth relativists want to do justice to the idea that there are genuine disagreements over a common subject matter and that idea allegedly calls for contents shared be-

between the parties of the disagreement, contents constant across contexts. Evidently, only if there are shared contents, can one person assert the very same proposition that another denies. That is the reason why truth relativism only enters the stage after truth-evaluable content has already been fixed. Its central claim is that propositional truth itself is relative.

The proponents of truth relativism typically claim that their novel semantic analyses are just extensions of more familiar forms of relativism. In possible worlds semantics, propositions are evaluated relative to possible worlds. A given proposition may be true relative to a world \( w_1 \), and false relative to another world \( w_2 \). In tense logic, propositions are evaluated relative to times. For example, the temporal proposition that Maria is sleeping may be true relative to a time \( t_1 \), and false relative to another time \( t_2 \). Temporalism is the view that truth and falsity are properties of propositions that they can lose. Eternalists deny this emphatically. They maintain that truth is a stable property; if something is true at all, then it is true once and for all. Frege in his „Kernsätze zur Logik“ said: „Jede Wahrheit ist ewig“ (“Every truth is eternal”).\(^{16}\) He was deeply convinced that propositions have their truth values absolutely, without relativization to anything, hence a fortiori without relativization to time. Contemporary alethic relativists, however, are not afraid of temporally indeterminate propositions. Rather, following the lead of David Kaplan and David Lewis, there is a consensus among them that truth must be relativized at least to triples of \(<\text{world}, \text{time}, \text{location}>\).\(^{17}\) But the strategy of parametrization, of adding new parameters – parameters for a standard of taste or a sense of humour, for example – into the circumstance of evaluation has been exploited further.

Consider now again the sentence type “It is raining”. Truth relativists maintain that this sentence type does express a context-insensitive complete proposition, namely the proposition that it is raining, and that every utterance of this type expresses exactly the same proposition. The explanation offered for the fact that one utterance of this type in a certain context may be true, while another utterance of it in another context may be false, is that, on the relativistic view of truth, the proposition that it is

\(^{16}\) Frege 1876, p. 190 (175).

\(^{17}\) Frege 1876, p. 190 (175).
raining does not have an absolute truth value, but only a truth value rela-
tive to the context of utterance. The truth of one and the same propo-
sition is relative to different contexts of utterance.

There are some interesting differences between various versions of
truth relativism. On Max Kölbel’s version, the truth of a proposition is
relative to what he calls a “perspective”, while on John MacFarlane’s ver-
sion truth is relative to what he calls a “context of assessment”. MacFarlane
puts emphasis on the distinction between contexts of assessment and
contexts of use or utterance, and argues that his account is superior to the
one proposed by Kölbel precisely because the latter does not recognize
that the relevant context to which truth must be relativized is the context
of assessment. For our present purposes, we can ignore the subtle differ-
ences between these suggestions and focus on their common core, which
consists in the assumption that there are operative points of assessment
with respect to which propositions have to be evaluated as true or false.

Remember, relativism about truth is supposed to rescue belief in fault-
less agreement from the charge of inconsistency. The basic idea is that p
may be true relative to A’s perspective while not-p may be true relative to
B’s perspective, although “p and not-p” is not true relative to any perspec-
tive. Since truth is relativized to different perspectives in this way, one can
no longer simply deduce from the fact that p and not-p cannot both be
true, that A and B cannot both assert true propositions.

Contemporary advocates of truth relativism are at great pains to dis-
tinguish their view from rival explanations of the phenomenon of fault-
less agreement, explanations, which, from the relativist’s standpoint, do
not really succeed in explaining the phenomenon but, rather, tend to ex-
plain it away. In particular, truth relativists insist that their view must not
be confused with any version of contextualism. Contextualists, if they are
prepared to extend semantic context-sensitivity into the sphere of moral
discourse, may suggest that we should not judge simply that “Kicking
babies for fun is wrong”, but only that “Kicking babies for fun is wrong
according to some moral framework M”. But if the contents of the ap-
parently inconsistent judgements that “Kicking babies for fun is wrong”
and that “It is not the case that kicking babies for fun is wrong” are re-
ally elliptical for judgements that are actually consistent when properly
expanded – “Kicking babies for fun is wrong according to some moral
framework M” and “It is not the case that kicking babies for fun is wrong
according to some moral framework \( M^* \) – then we can no longer capture the sense in which the participants are disagreeing. Both could be right, but they would mean different things by their utterances and so would actually talk past each other.

But does the truth relativist's account really fare better in this regard? Does it succeed in retaining a sense of disagreement? I don't think so. On this account too both parties can agree. Surely, they can agree that “Kicking babies for fun is wrong” is true relative to moral perspective \( M_1 \), and that It is not the case that kicking babies for fun is wrong” is true relative to the different moral perspective \( M_2 \). The crucial point is that, on both the contextualist’s and the relativist’s accounts, the truth of the relevant propositions is determined by the conflicting moral standards. What one account presents as an additional parameter to which truth must be relativized, the other presents as a contextual factor variation in which yields variation in propositional content. Both accounts, as far as I can see, are incapable of explaining the alleged phenomenon of faultless disagreement. They stand or fall together. My suspicion is that faultless disagreement is an illusion. When the smoke has cleared, we begin to see that there are only ordinary disagreements in which at most one party can be right. Hence, a convincing formulation of the doctrine of truth relativism must be based on a different idea.

IV

Let me end with some reflections on the notion of truth adherents of truth relativism are working with. What is their account of truth? They are somewhat coy concerning this central question. Naturally, they reject the very possibility of a correspondence theory of truth. They don't believe in frame-independent truth-makers that could render our statements true. But neither, it seems, can they embrace deflationism about truth. The leading idea of deflationism is that the equivalence schema TS: “The proposition that \( p \) is true if and only if \( p \)” is definitional of the concept of truth. The claim is that the meaning of the truth predicate is given by the totality of appropriate instances of this schema, so that all that is required to grasp the concept of truth is contained in instances of it. To explain, for example, what it is for the proposition that the earth is round to be true, one can hardly do better than to point out that it is
true if and only if the earth is round. And so on for propositions generally. The trouble is that this schema does not mention relative truth at all. So if deflationism is correct, and all there is to know about truth is given by instances of this schema, then truth relativism is wrong. The relativist might propose the following schema instead: “The proposition that p is true if and if the proposition that p is true relative to a framework F”. But this schema cannot be derived from TS, at least not without additional and highly contentious assumptions.

The truth schema TS, the modern propositional variant of Alfred Tarski’s famous Convention T, is fundamental to our understanding of truth. Divergences from it should not be taken lightly. According to TS, truth is a monadic property of propositions. I think that is the correct view. Of course, one need not deny that one can define relational truth properties, such as being true at a world. What should be insisted upon, however, is that these relational truth properties have to be explained in terms of the more fundamental property of truth simpliciter. Fans of alethic relativism, strongly influenced by the conceptual apparatus of possible worlds semantics, are inclined to reverse this order of explanation. If one is convinced that truth relative to a world is the fundamental notion, one has to conceive of ordinary truth as truth relative to a particular world – the actual world. But the actual world is not just one world among many others. It is the only reality there is. Therefore, we can simply say that the proposition that Paris is the capital of France is true without having to add that it is true at the actual world. No doubt, possible worlds semantics provides us with an extremely useful formal machinery for analyzing and understanding modal logic. But we must be careful not to overestimate the metaphysical consequences of this successful style of semantics.

So we still have no satisfactory answer to the question of what positive characterization the relativist can give of the concept of truth he employs. It might seem that there is a close linkage between epistemic analyses of truth and alethic relativism. Many anti-realists have proposed epistemic analyses of truth, analyses that attempt to define truth by verifiability, by rational assertibility, by permanent credibility, or by justifiability under ideal conditions. Obviously, truth cannot simply be identified with justifiability simpliciter. There are countless beliefs that were once justified
for certain persons at certain times, but which later turned out to be false. Justification is tensed and so can be lost. But, at least for objectivist regions of discourse, truth is a stable property, a property that cannot be lost. Aware of our fallibility, testified by the enormous changes that have happened in the history of human thought, advocates of epistemic accounts came to believe that truth should not be bound to what is justified by present standards. Our present epistemic situation may be imperfect; it may not include all the relevant evidence. Rather, so the suggestion in the tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce, truth consists in coherence with the system of beliefs that human investigators will hold at the final stage of inquiry, in the limit of an ideal science that has all relevant evidence at its disposal. Peirce famously claimed: “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth”.19 More recently, Hilary Putnam, during his interim internal realist phase, maintained that truth is an idealization of rational acceptability. A statement is true, he said, if it would be justified under epistemically ideal circumstances.20 It should be mentioned, however, that he later un-equivocally abjured any attempt to define truth in epistemic terms and returned to a position he came to call “common-sense realism”, a position that acknowledges that truth is sometimes recognition-transcendent.21

The ideal justifiability account of truth seems to be afflicted with several serious difficulties. Critics have raised the objection that the ideal justifiability account of truth is circular, since its main concept of an epistemically ideal situation ultimately cannot adequately be defined without reference to the concept of truth.22 Proponents of the epistemic approach to truth have wisely abstained from making any serious attempt to specify what ideal epistemic conditions for a given belief involve. Evidently, however, in such ideal situations the possibility of error must be ruled out unquestionably. Hence one might suggest characterizing ideal conditions as conditions in which all relevant sources of error have been identified. But it seems hardly possible to understand this suggestion without a prior grasp of the concept of truth.

Be that as it may, this moderate verificationist proposal does not square

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19 Peirce 1934, 5.407.
with the relativist’s intentions anyway, because a belief that is justifiably or rationally assertible in the ideal limit will have no rival and thus will be absolutely true.

So, it still seems that we have no satisfactory answer to the question of what truth is for the relativist.

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