

Stalnaker's Context, "Contextualism and the New Relativism" and Appendix
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1 – Main aims:

- (1) Extend the pragmatic account of inquiry to cover nonfactual discourse.
- (2) Contrast and relate this approach to relativist proposals.
- (3) Give an account of expressivism, and relate it to relativism.

2 – Stalnaker's 'possibility-carving' conception of inquiry

Stalnaker (1978, 1984) models 'inquiry' in general as an evolving state of information, capturing what we presuppose and believe (or accept): the *common ground* (CG), a set of possible worlds.

In conversation, participants 'propose' to modify the CG via *assertion*.

For Stalnaker, assertion "serves to distinguish certain ways the world might be from others, for the purpose (in the case of assertion at least) of locating the actual world".

Say I believe that ϕ . I assert that ϕ , proposing to 'remove' the $\neg\phi$ -worlds from the CG.

If my assertion is accepted, the CG is modified, and (by my lights) we've moved one step closer to locating the actual world in logical space.

How? The idea is that the object of my belief/assertion—that ϕ —is the set of ϕ -worlds, a possible worlds proposition. So the CG updates via set intersection.

Usually, we assert that ϕ by uttering a sentence S that means that ϕ . For this to work, that S means that ϕ must be part of the CG.

Glitches:

- (a) If the worlds are *metaphysically possible*, we can't model inquiry into the necessary. So mathematical, metaphysical, and maybe ethical inquiry need special treatment.
- (b) How do worlds get 'back in'? Suppose, at 9:00, I assert that it's 9:00. Now all not-9:00 worlds are gone. A minute later, I assert that it's 9:01. The CG is now the empty set.

[*Debugging:* Consult various MIT alumni.]

3 – Relativism and Contextualism

Traditional Relativism: Absolute claims are really relational claims.
Relativity is located in the *content* of what is said.

Moral relativism: 'Murder is wrong' gets analyzed as saying of murder that it's wrong relative to some set of norms.

Spatial relativism: 'Bob is in Cambridge' gets analyzed as saying of Bob that he's spatially related to some other objects.

Motivation: There are no truthmakers for the absolute claims.

Contextualism: Absolute claims can only be made relative to some parameter. Relativity is located in the *determination* of what is said.

Moral contextualism: ‘Murder is wrong’ says murder has some monadic property denoted by ‘is wrong’, which varies by context.

Spatial contextualism: ‘Bob is in Cambridge’ says Bob has some absolute location property denoted by ‘is in Cambridge’, which varies by context.

Motivation: Accommodates truthmakers for absolute claims.

Suppose absolute wrongness is determined by the true norms. Then, if context supplies the true norms, which fix the meaning of ‘is wrong’, then ‘Murder is wrong’ will attribute absolute wrongness to murder.

Suppose absolute location is determined by the true coordinate system. If context supplies the true system, fixing the meaning of ‘is in Cambridge’, then ‘Bob is in Cambridge’ will attribute absolute locatedness to Bob.

Relation between Relativism and Contextualism:

For the Relativist, when I say ‘Murder is wrong’ and mean that murder is wrong relative to some set of norms, is the reference to the norms *implicit* or *explicit*?

If implicit, then it’s contextually-determined, and a relativist about ‘is wrong’ is also a kind of contextualist.

But there *won’t* be this kind of context-dependence if the reference is *explicit*—if what’s said is that murder is wrong relative to set of norms N.

[Really? I say ‘Murder is wrong’. Why do I say it’s wrong relative to N and not N*? Somehow the meaning of ‘is wrong’ is fixed such that I’m talking about N not N*. How else if not by context?]

4 – Versions of Semantic Relativism (about Truth):

v1.0: S is true iff S is true relative to some context (where S is a sentence).¹

This is the right story for any sentence S containing context-dependent words. But this isn’t an interesting kind of relative truth, says Stalnaker.

So we need a **v2.0** that takes propositions to have their truth-values relatively. Well, what is a *proposition*? Something that plays a certain roles:

Content Role: Propositions are the objects of attitudes and assertions.

Disagreement Role: Two disagree just if one denies a proposition the other affirms.

We can see versions of semantic relativism as based on different views on these roles’ players.

¹ I use ‘iff’ to abbreviate ‘if and only if’ with a left-to-right direction of analysis/ground.

Suppose propositions are *sets of possible worlds*, or functions from worlds to truth-values, as in Stalnaker's account of inquiry. Do we then get relative truth via relativity to worlds?

v2.0: P is true $\overleftrightarrow{\text{iff}}$ P is true relative to a possible world (where P is possible worlds proposition)

Example: Suppose in George Bush's dream world, w , he says 'Our Iraqi policy has been a success', expressing the proposition Q.

Q is *true* relative to the counterfactual world w ($w \in Q$).

Q is *false* relative to the actual world w_α ($w_\alpha \notin Q$).

Stalnaker says cases like this don't establish **v2.0** as a form of Truth Relativism.

Even if propositions are just sets of worlds, 'Q is true' is not *analyzable* as either Q is true relative to some world, or Q is true relative to w_α . Given actualism, truth-in- w is not on par with truth-in- w_α . They receive different treatments:

Q is true relative to w_α $\overleftrightarrow{\text{iff}}$ Q is true simpliciter

Q is true relative to w $\overleftrightarrow{\text{iff}}$ Q would be true if w were actual.

For relativists like Andy Egan, propositions are representable as *sets of centered worlds*; a 'centered proposition' is a function from centered-worlds to truth-values.

v3.0: P is true $\overleftrightarrow{\text{iff}}$ P is true relative to a centered world (where P is centered proposition)

Stalnaker thinks **v3.0** isn't an interesting form of relative truth.

Centered propositions don't play the Disagreement Role: 'I was born in Canada' uttered by me, and 'I was born in Canada' uttered by an American. express *the same* centered proposition. I affirm it; the American denies it. We don't disagree.

Now, what's supposed to be interesting about relative truth is that it allows for subjects to disagree while both being right. So, **v4.0** should allow a 'proposition' to be false relative to its denier's context, while being true relative to its affirmer's context.

Enter MacFarlane: propositions are *assessment-sensitive*; 'assessment-sensitive propositions' ('R-proposition' for Stalnaker) are functions from context-world pairs to truth-values.

v4.0: P is true $\overleftrightarrow{\text{iff}}$ P is true relative to a context of assessment (where P is assessment-sensitive)

This is a 'two-stage' view of how we get from sentences to truth-values.

First, sentences express assessment-sensitive propositions relative to contexts of utterance. *Second*, assessment-sensitive propositions are true or false relative to a context of assessment. (Contexts may or may not be the same.)

Stalnaker thinks v4.0 is at least a viable, interesting form of Relativism about truth.

But he will argue for a *different* treatment of the Relativist's favorite cases.

5 – Relativist-friendly cases

(1) *Open Future*:

Suppose the future is *open*; it's unsettled now whether they'll be a seabattle tomorrow. Suppose I say now, at t_1 , 'There'll be a seabattle tomorrow'. Intuitively, I've expressed a proposition; my utterance has truth-conditions. But it's not true or false now at the context of utterance at t_2 . Jump ahead 24 hours. It's now the next day. Lo and behold, there's a seabattle. Intuitively, what I said yesterday is true relative to *now*, t_2 .

(2) *Tasty*:

Suppose I assert that sea urchin is tasty because I enjoy eating it. But you contradict me because you don't enjoy eating it. In a sense, we're disagreeing. But in another sense, we're both right, each relative to our own tastes.

(3) *Gradable Adjectives*:

Millionaire Mary is said to be rich by Didi. Billionaire Naomi says she's not rich in another conversation. Now, assume they agree about all the relevant facts (comparison class, etc.). Still, a third party to both conversations can report them as disagreeing.

(4) *Norms*:

One resolute expressivist thinks it's wrong to torture POWs, another doesn't. They discover their 'disagreement' is rooted in commitments to different sets of norms. Do they disagree? In some sense 'yes', but not about the facts. And maybe there's a sense in which they're both right.

A **v4.0**-relativist might tell a uniform story about (1)–(4).

For example, in *Open Future*, the proposition I expressed yesterday is true relative to the context of assessment today at t_2 .

Stalnaker wants to give a different story, extending the possibility-carving approach to inquiry.

6 – Stalnaker's uniform diagnosis

- (i) In cases like (1)–(4), we're 'carving' logical space 'finer than the facts', distinguishing between *nonfactual possibilities*.
- (ii) Whether we're disagreeing, and whether one of us is 'right', depends on *why we're carving*. Genuine disagreement depends on the *aim* of the discourse.
- (iii) Nonfactual disagreement isn't grounded in affirming/denying the same content.

(i) *Factual vs. nonfactual possibilities*: Distinguish two kinds of possibilities:

- (a) Possible total state of the world determining all that there is a fact of the matter about.
- (b) A point in the logical space that we 'carve up' in inquiry and deliberation.

We use both. Often, they're the same. But *sometimes* we "cut the space up *more* finely than is determined by what there is a fact of the matter about".

Factual possibilities are (a)-possibilities.

Nonfactual possibilities are (b)-possibilities that are *not* (a)-possibilities.

What are nonfactual possibilities? Go back to the relativist-friendly cases (1)–(4):

- (1) Descriptions of how the unsettled future might go for all we know.
- (2) Standards of taste.
- (3) Gradable criteria for richness.
- (4) Sets of norms.

They're nonfactual, we're assuming, because there's no actual way the future will go, no actual correct standard of taste, no actual criteria for richness, and no actual correct set of norms. To model this, make logical space have factual possibilities as rows, and nonfactual as columns.

(ii) Is disagreement about the nonfactual genuine? Can we be 'right' about nonfactual matters?

'Yes' if these conditions are met, 'No' if one isn't:

- C1:* The nonfactual is not confused for the factual.
C2: We have a good reason to 'carve up' logical space finer than the facts.
C3: We have good reason to accept/reject some nonfactual possibilities over others (when we're carving for the C2-reason²).

When we fail to meet *C1*, we're still 'disagreeing', but we're *both wrong*. It's not faultless.

- (1) *Open Future*: We can reasonably disagree about an open future if and because we take it to be open (*C1*), making predictions about the future is rational even if it's open (*C2*), and there can be fact-based or other reasons to accept some predictions over others (*C3*).
- (2) *Tasty*: If by asserting that sea urchin is tasty or not we're merely *expressing* our tastes, we can't sensibly disagree (*C3* not met). But if there's a pretense of a correct standard of taste (*C2*), and we think our tastes ought to approximate the standard (*C3*), maybe we can. If it's falsely presupposed that there's a correct standard of taste (*C1* not met), we're 'disagreeing', but it's not genuine; we're *both wrong*.
- (3) *Gradable Adjectives*: If the aim is to contest the use or meaning of 'rich', we might have good reason to disagree. Semantic disagreement not tracking facts can be rational.
- (4) *Norms*: Long story – will discuss Expressivism in the next section.

(iii) Genuinely disagreement in (1)–(4)-type cases doesn't center on a *single content*.

Hazardous interpretation:

What is disagreement in the first instance, for Stalnaker? In a context, one asserts ϕ , another asserts $\neg\phi$. Disagreement is *conflict in proposals to modify the context*.

When ϕ is *factual*, disagreement is based in belief/disbelief in a single content.

When ϕ is *nonfactual*, it's based in other 'conflicting' attitudes differing in nonfactual content.

What is it to 'communicate' or 'accept' nonfactual contents? This are meta-semantic and meta-normative questions that Stalnaker doesn't directly address (p. 230, fn. 13)

² The thought is that the aim of our discourse might be a good reason to distinguish between nonfactual possibilities, but within that discourse we have no good reason to accept/reject possibilities. Merely expressive discourses might be cases if it's rational to express our feelings, but it's not rational to accept/reject such expressions.

7 – Expressivism (about the Normative):

Four components (by my count):

- (E1) There are no truthmakers for absolute normative claims.
- (E2) The aim of normative discourse is _____.
- (E3) x is committed to a normative ϕ iff x accepts a set of norms N , and ϕ is true relative to N .
- (E4) x accepts a set of norms N iff _____.

Stalnaker says the Expressivist should fill in the blanks in (E2) and (E4), but these are big questions that Expressivism *qua view* doesn't settle. He's sympathetic to Gibbard's filling-ins.

Now, by accepting (E1), a Stalnakerian Expressivist won't confuse norms with factual possibilities (C1). They will fill in (E2) to ensure we have good reason to engage in normative discourse. They will then think of engaging in normative discourse as carving up logical space finer than the facts, so we have good reason to do so (C2).

That reason will be something like coordinating or resolving practical disagreements, as in Gibbard (1992). But this requires rejecting/accept some norms over others (C3).

Expressivism leads to Relativism: both "parts of a single approach to normative discourse".

Relativism is needed to make sense of (E3).

Expressivists think normative claims are true or false (in the minimalist sense). But because (E1), they must be true or false *relative to something*, like sets of norms. So, Expressivists are Relativists.

[One odd consequence is that if two Realists dispute whether murder is wrong, both are wrong (C1 not met). But if two Expressivists have the same conversation, one is right.]

Stalnakerian Expressivist-Relativism is *also* a form of Contextualism (on my reading...):

They accept this analysis, for a normative claim ϕ : ϕ is true iff ϕ is true relative to N .

Which N ? Presumably, this will be fixed by context.

If ϕ is uttered in a context where a set of norms N^* is in the CG, then ϕ will be true just if it's true relative to N^* .

If ϕ is uttered in a context where the CG is undecided between norms N^1 and N^2 , what happens?

Perhaps ϕ uttered in a context c is true relative to a set of norms N iff ϕ is true relative to N and N is the set of norms presupposed in c .

So, if there is no *single* set of norms in c , maybe ϕ won't be true or false in the context of utterance; maybe its truth-value will be undefined. Still, the assertion of ϕ will have the effect of proposing to remove from the CG any norms on which $\neg\phi$.