

ON BROGAARD'S 'TRIVIAL ARGUMENT AGAINST VALUE MONISM'

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Warning: *Please note that the following comments are rather hastily put together for the purpose of the Epistemic Value Conference at Stirling University. They are intended to serve as the basis for my spoken comments on that occasion not as self-standing piece.*

Berit Brogaard states and refutes an argument, the trivial argument (henceforth TA), against epistemic value monism (henceforth; EVM), roughly, the doctrine that there is exactly one ultimate epistemic goal: Truth. The trivial argument purports to displace EVM in favour of epistemic value pluralism (henceforth; EVP). This is the idea that “Truth is only one of many epistemic goals and its supremacy can be overridden” (p1).

After a tour around temporal indexicals Brogaard provisionally formulates EVM:

(EG`) *For any proposition p and a time t , the epistemic goal is to believe that p iff it is true that p at t .*

The idea underlying the Trivial Argument is that (EG`), is inconsistent with propositions which are not absolutely true. Brogaard does not define ‘absolutely true’. But she characterizes it as follows:

(AT) *A proposition, p , is absolutely true iff there is an absolute matter of fact as to whether p is true (at a world, time)*

Hence: *If p is absolutely true, then p may be assigned a truth-value (at world, time) which is judge-independent*

Relativism is best understood as a thesis about propositions:

(RT) *The truth-values of some propositions (at a world, time) depend on a judge.*

Hence: *There are some propositions with respect to which there is no fact of the matter as to whether they are true. So, relativist propositions are not absolutely true.*

Brogaard takes her refutation of TA to preserve EVM but to show that (EG`) is an inadequate formulation of EVM. But she provides a reformulation, (EG```) which preserves the essence of EVM while being consistent linguistic data purported to motivate relativism. So, if Brogaard diagnosis and treatment is correct, we would have a case in which a trivial argument gives rise to substantive result. We would also have a case in which semantic considerations lead to an epistemological insight.

Let us first get clear on the scope and limits of the threat to EVM which TA provides. The argument does not establish that any proposition with an absolute truth-value is subject to – and much less overridden by – epistemic goals other than truth. Thus, one response to TA is to *restrict* (EG) to absolutely true propositions:

(EG*) *For any proposition, p, with an absolute truth-value (at a world, time, place), the epistemic goal is to believe that p iff it is true that p*

But Brogaard argues further that rather than revising or restricting EVM we should merely *reformulate* EVM by some other, more general, thesis than (EG') and EG*).

T1:	There is a proposition, r, which is not absolutely true	from (RT)
T2:	(EG')	from (EG')
T3:	(EG') entails that (if r is not absolutely true, then S shouldn't believe r)	from (EG')
T4:	(EG') entails that (if r is not absolutely true, then S shouldn't believe non-r)	from (EG')
T5:	(S should believe that r) or (S should believe that non-r)	Ass
T6:	(S shouldn't believe r) and (S shouldn't believe non-r)	from T1', T2', T3'
T7:	Contradiction!	from T5', T6'
T8:	non-(EG')	from T2', T7'

A few brief comments.

First, the argument can be run by other non-absolutely true propositions. E.g., p's with no truth-value. Perhaps the one expressed by 'the present king of France is bald'

Second, how plausible is T5 if r has no absolute truth value. T1 and T5 appears to be in conflict. If we should (bel p or bel non-p), then p has an absolute TV?

Third, T5 is hardly trivial as it stands. S might have equally good justification for believing r and non-r. If so, she should suspend belief regarding r. Moreover, it should be restricted to the set of propositions within S'd 'cognitive reach' or the like.

Fourth, it is not clear that T3 and T4 are vindicated by (EG'). This is because (EG') is coined in terms of truth *simpliciter* and whereas the two premises are coined in terms of absolute truth. But presumably not every true proposition is absolutely true.

I think the third and fourth point need addressing before we have a *trivial* argument. The restriction theorist would, of course, reject T5 – even in a reformulated version.

On to the semantics for predicates of personal taste (PPT's). Those are among the best candidates for linguistic items which give rise to 'relatively true propositions'. Brogaard considers the following set of data regarding PPT's.

- (i): **Disagreement:** Agent's disagree as to the extensions of PPT's.
- (ii): **Retraction:** Agent's often retract PPT judgments/assertions
- (iii): **Disanalogy with context-sensitive terms:** PPT's function semantically different from context-sensitive terms such as indexicals and gradable adjectives. Extensions of PPT's do not vary across contexts of use.
- (iv): **Belief Reports:** We easily disquote belief reports in which a PPT occurs within the scope of the doxastic operator.

Three semantic accounts of the data in question are considered:

Contextualism: This is a hidden-indexical account which has it that the context of use (in Kaplan's sense) of a sentence involving a PPT determines an invariant, but enriched, content: the proposition expressed contain an agent and a judgment relation. So, John's assertion

(J) Ice cream tastes great

expresses something like an enriched structured proposition in which we have John and the judging relation in addition to ice cream and the property of tasting great. Had Mary asserted (J) she would have asserted *a distinct* proposition. Let's not worry about how to represent such an enriched proposition formally. What seems clear is that if such an account is true, then the semantics of PPT does not support (RT). Thus KT and (EG') stands. All propositions have an absolute truth-value – however, propositions expressed by sentences involving PPT's are quite complex. Thus, the (indexical)-contextualist would reject T1 in the above formulation of the trivial argument.

I do not find Brogaard's dismissal of the hidden-indexical account conclusive. Let me mention one datum, namely; belief-reports. Brogaard says that a hidden-indexical theory gets wrong Mary's assertion about John taste for ice cream:

(1) He thinks it tastes great

This belief-report, says Brogaard, gets messed up on the hidden-indexical account as it is committed to having John believe that ice cream tastes great *by Mary's lights* (Ibid p18).

But, of course, the hidden-indexical theorist should develop her theory to accommodate belief-reports – a phenomenon which calls for development of *any* semantics of non-imbedded sentences. And Brogaard has not provided any principled reason why she couldn't do so. I'll just mention one approach: It might be said that the indexical which is hidden in a normal non-reported assertion *is made explicit* in belief-reports. That is, Mary's anaphoric 'he' explicates John's indexical 'I' said to be hidden in John's unimbedded assertion of 'ice cream tastes great'. So, we get, as does not seem unnatural, the upshot that Mary's assertion of (1) expresses that John believes that ice cream tastes great. Here the complement clause does not contain the hidden indexical insofar as it has been 'explicated away' so to speak.

So, we easily disquote because we easily explicate away 'hidden indexicals'. Hence, (J) and (1) would express the same proposition. That is, the same enriched structured proposition which has *John* as a constituent along with ice cream and the property of tasting great and a 'liking that' relation holding between them. And that proposition will either be absolutely true or absolutely false (at a time at a world).

Relativism: According to RS, the content – the proposition expressed – by, say, 'ice cream tastes great' is invariant across contexts of use. So, John and Mary assert the same thing when they assert 'ice cream states great, respectively. But propositions expressed by PPT's can only be assigned a truth-value relative to a Context of Assessment. And the proposition expressed by John's and Mary's assertions may well be true in Mary's

context of evaluation and true in John's. So, the proposition expressed by 'ice cream tastes great' does not have an absolute truth-value. But that's (RT).

Brogaard, claims that we cannot merely revise the formulation of EVM in accordance with the relativist semantics. But I don't see why. As Brogaard herself points out, it should be possible to revise (EG) to fit whatever semantics of PPT's turns out to be correct. So, if RS is the correct semantics, the EVM should be expressed along the following line which Brogaard does not address:

(EG#) *For any proposition, p , time, t , and context of use C_U , the epistemic goal is to believe p iff p is true in the Circumstance of Evaluation determined by C_U and the relevant Context of Assessment at t*

Perspectivalism: Brogaard's competing perspectivalist semantics has it that PPT's "...have the same content across contexts ...". So, PPT's have stable characters: Variance in Context of use does not yield a variance in proposition expressed. But Brogaard introduces a notion of a Circumstance of Evaluation which consists of an ordered triple $\langle \text{world, time, judge} \rangle$. Brogaard says that "...the contents determine a function from circumstances [of evaluation] to extensions." The Circumstances of Evaluation are also fully determined by the Contexts of Use. For the Context of Use fully determines the additional 'judge'-parameter. The default-judge is the speaker. But, in certain settings the Context of Use determines someone else than.

Since both the Content of a PPT and the Circumstance of Evaluation are *fully* determined by a context of use and the truth-value is determined by a function from Contents and Circumstances of Evaluation, PPT's are context-sensitive. Variations in the Context of Use which pertains to the judge-parameter, may result in variations in truth-value *although it is the same proposition which is expressed in the two contexts of use*. For example, John's and Mary's respective assertions of 'ice cream tastes great' express the same proposition. But this proposition may be both true and false depending on the respective contexts of use.

So, the judge-parameter inherent in PPT's is quite different from standard indexicals. For with standard indexicals, we have a truth-value once we have a Content (at a time and world). Not so, with PPT's. So, despite the fact that the Content of non-indexical sentences involving PPT's is invariant across contexts of use, the truth-value of such sentences is not.

So, despite Brogaard's claim to 'reject relativism', her account seems like a very minor modification of the relativist semantics. Both accounts have it that the contents/propositions expressed by PPT-sentences are invariant across Contexts of Use. That is, in Kaplanesque, they have stable characters. And both accounts have it that the truth-values of those contents/propositions (at a time and world) depended on an additional judge-parameter in the Circumstances of Evaluation. According to the relativist, the judge-parameter is determined by the Context of Assessment. Brogaard says that it is determined by the, familiar, Context of Use. This yields a difference with regards to **sentence-truth**. According to perspectivalism, given a Context of Use, the *sentence* is absolutely true/false. According to the relativist the sentence is only true/false relative to a Context of Assessment.

But as far as *propositions* go, the upshot is precisely the same: Certain the propositions are prone to truth-value change with change in the judge-parameter. So, some propositions are not absolutely true in the sense that their truth-value is not judge-independent. But this is the central relativist doctrine which is exploited in the trivial argument. That is, in effect T1.

So, according to Brogaard's perspectival semantics RT is true as well! So, T1 stands. But according to perspectivalism (EG') should be rejected in favor of (EG''). But once (EG') is replaced with (EG'') in the antecedents of T3 and T4, the conditionals are false. Consider T3: (EG''), as opposed to (EG') does not entail that if r is not absolutely true, then S shouldn't believe that r. For it might well be that she should. For it might well be that according to her standards r is true. And she should believe what is true – just as the value monist has it.

First, I think it is far too meager to merely add a 'judge-parameter' to the Circumstances of Evaluation. A 'set of standards' or the like seems more appropriate. But how to represent such a set of standards formally is not a trivial matter – recall that we want to be able to have propositional content to be represented from a function taking circumstances of evaluation as arguments and delivering a truth-value as its value.

Second, it is implausible to generalize the account to a number of the linguistic phenomena mentioned as candidates. In particular, I would argue that future contingents, 'knows' and its cognates as well as color predicates are to be given classical *invariantist* accounts.

Epistemic modals and moral terms are better candidates for perspectivals. But a uniform account can't be given. What should be added to the circumstances of evaluation will vary with the term in question. Perhaps, in the case of epistemic modals, a set of known/warranted propositions should be added to the Circumstances of Evaluation. And the set of standards to be added to the Circumstances of Evaluation of moral propositions should, as opposed to predicate of personal taste, be objectively restricted – or so one might hope. Otherwise, we'd get the uncomfortable result that the proposition expressed by 'eating babies for breakfast is fun' is true by the infamous dictator's standards.

So, we should watch out for over-generalizing the perspectivalist account. While semantic uniformity is a nice thing, accuracy is –after all – more important.