

The Many Faces of Relativism

Edited by
Maria Baghramian



The Many Faces of Relativism

This book is a study of relativism as a dominant intellectual preoccupation of our time. Relativism is a philosophical reaction to the intractable differences of perspectives and disagreements in various domains. Standards of truth, rationality, and ethical right and wrong vary greatly and there are no universal criteria for adjudicating between them. In considering this problem, relativism suggests that what is true or right can only be determined within variable contexts of assessment.

This book brings together articles originally published in the *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* over a period of 17 years, as well as in a special issue of the journal published in 2004. The chapters in Section I discuss some of the main forms of relativism. Section II sheds light on the different motivations for relativism, assessing their strengths and weaknesses. Section III provides a detailed examination of the vexed question of whether Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his later work, supported relativism. The varied responses to this important question shed light on the issues discussed in Sections I and II. This collection is a lively and engaging resource for scholars interested in the crucial impact relativism has had on the way we think about objectivity, truth and what is right and wrong.

The chapters in this book were originally published in the *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*.

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Introduction:

The Many Faces of Relativism

Maria Baghramian

Relativism, an ancient philosophical doctrine, has become a dominant topic of debate in recent decades. The plethora of positions bearing the name however, betrays a diversity of presuppositions and at times irreconcilable assumptions. The problem is not that relativism can be carved up in different ways, it is commonplace that it could. The real problem is whether there is a single doctrine underlying the large number of loosely interconnected positions bearing the name 'relativism'. The collection of articles gathered here highlight this diversity while leaving open the possibility of finding some common themes and approaches that may underlie it. Discussions of relativism in the last two decades have fallen under a number of distinct headings.

1. Cultural Relativism

Modern cultural relativism is inspired by the work of social anthropologists who, starting with Edward Westermarck, have argued that there could be no such thing as culturally neutral criteria for adjudicating between conflicting claims arising from different cultural contexts. The view has become one of the best known forms of relativism of recent times and has shaped not only the theoretical framework of the social sciences but also the ethical and political outlook of many non-specialists. Cultural relativism is usually sub-divided into evaluative and cognitive relativism, but much of the contemporary discussions focus primarily on ethical, social and aesthetic issues where it is argued that moral norms, aesthetic values and legal precepts are products of inter-subjective agreement among those sharing a cultural or social outlook. The primary motivations for this kind of relativism are (a) the belief that there is a significant degree of diversity in norms, values and beliefs across cultures and historic periods, (b) a pessimistic induction from the failures of previous attempts to resolve disagreements on moral and cognitive precepts to the conclusion that there are no universal criteria for adjudicating between them, (c) the presupposition that values and beliefs bear the imprint of their

cultural and historical settings, and (d) a normative call for tolerance. (a) to (d) are discussed in a variety of ways by a majority of the essays collected here.

2. Conceptual Relativism

This is a more narrowly delineated form of relativism where ontology is relativised to conceptual schemes, scientific paradigms, or language games. The underlying rationale for this form of relativism is the belief that the world does not present itself to us ready-made or ready-carved, rather we supply different, and at times incompatible, ways of categorising and conceptualising it. Conceptual relativism is motivated by philosophical considerations that have little to do with the impulses informing cultural relativism. While cultural relativism attempts to address the phenomenon of pervasive and irresolvable disagreement, the guiding thought behind conceptual relativism is the idea that the human mind is not a passive faculty merely representing an independent reality. The mind, the suggestion is, has an active role in shaping the 'real' and such shaping can take various, possibly even incompatible forms. Quine's (1968) ontological relativity and Hilary Putnam's (1990) conceptual relativity are notable examples.

3. New Relativism

Semantic relativism, also known as 'New Relativism', is a recent development arising from considerations given to assertions containing predicates that do not seem suitable for assignment of truth values in a standard manner, in particular expressions of personal taste, epistemic modals, moral predicates, future contingents, context-sensitive ascriptions of knowledge, and epistemic possibility. The claim is that the truth and falsity of such statements can be determined only relative to a context of assessment, because the evaluation of their truth depends not just on the context in which these statements are uttered—when, where, to whom, by whom, in what language, and the state of the world in relevant respects—but also on their context of assessment. Contexts of assessment could include time of assessment, information state of assessor, relevance to the range of interests the assessor has, taste parameter, and the aesthetic or moral standards of the agent. The suggestion is that token assertions could receive different truth-values depending on their context of assessment. John MacFarlane, for instance, claims that the truth-conditions of utterances for a certain class of statements, e.g. disputes about taste and values, future contingent propositions, and attributions of knowledge, may be appropriately treated as true relative not just to their context of use but also to the contexts of assessment. A statement can be true relative to one 'context of assessment' and false relative to another (e.g. MacFarlane, 2005, 2007).

The motivation for New Relativism, as we saw, is primarily linguistic and this raises questions regarding its continuity with more traditional forms of relativism (see Boghossian 2006: 19 quoted below and 2008), such as cultural relativism, which have a metaphysical and epistemological import and arise from worries regarding the possibility of objectivity in the face of irreconcilable diversity of beliefs. But the distinction between old and new relativism is not as clear-cut as all that. For as Crispin Wright points out, both traditional relativistic thinking and New Relativism hold that there are no defensible absolute notions of morally justified action or justified belief. They both hold that whether an action, or a belief, is justified depends on one's standards. Traditional forms of relativism, he goes on to claim, can easily be assimilated into New Relativism if the principles of moral and epistemic evaluation are taken to be the relevant kinds of assessment-contextual parameters. (Wright 2008: 381).

The different types of relativism, outlined above, not only have varying philosophical motivations and respond to a variety of concerns, but they also have distinct intellectual genealogies. Cultural relativism has the longest philosophical pedigree, going back to Protagoras and Classical Greece, re-emerging with Montaigne at the dawn of modern philosophy and receiving its full articulation at the beginning of 20th century. Versions of conceptual relativism were developed in 19th century post Kantianism and were identified as forms of psychologism by Frege and Husserl. New Relativism is a very recent and somewhat unexpected development within analytic philosophy motivated by questions about the role of context in the assignments of truth values and meaning and comes on foot of earlier work done by David Kaplan and David Lewis who did not use the label 'relativist' for their positions.

This diversity of motivations and intellectual genealogies in part explains why it has proven so difficult to find a single commonly accepted definition of relativism, one that would cover not only the position of its advocates but also that of philosophers who, despite repeated denials, have been saddled with the label. Some of the best work on relativism in recent years has been done at this meta-relativistic level (e.g. Boghossian 2006), and while no single uncontested definition of 'relativism' is available, we can distinguish between three key approaches to the topic.

The first—which I call definition by enumeration or DE—lists the major doctrines that have been labelled by their advocates or critics as 'relativist' by analysing their underlying structure. The second—which I call definition by abstraction or DA—attempts to define relativism by capturing and abstracting some of its essential features. DA, if successful, should map onto DE, but frequently it does not (see Baghramian 2010 on this point). The third approach defines relativism indirectly, by positioning it against its contrast terms 'objectivism', 'universalism', 'absolutism' and 'context-independence'. The approach, which I call Negative Definition or ND, is chiefly used by critics of relativism against reluctant relativists such as Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida.

THE MANY FACES OF RELATIVISM

DE often is advanced by asking the dual questions: (a) what is it that we are relativising?, and (b) what is it being relativised to? The first question enables us to distinguish relativism in terms of its objects, for example, relativism about truth, goodness, beauty and in terms of its subject matter e.g. science, law, religion. The answer to the second question individuates relativism in terms of its domain or frame of reference, e.g. conceptual, cultural and historical.

Objects of Relativisation	Domains of Relativisation
(A) Cognitive norms: truth, rationality, logic, justificatory standards (cognitive relativism, epistemic relativism, postmodernism, alethic relativism)	I- Individual's view-points and preferences (subjectivism, New Relativism)
(B) Moral values (moral relativism)	II- Historical epochs (historicism)
(C) Aesthetic values (aesthetic relativism)	III- Cultures, social groupings (cultural relativism, social relativism)
(D) Knowledge claims, worldviews, ontologies, systems of belief (cognitive, conceptual, and epistemic relativism, social constructivism)	IV- Conceptual schemes, languages, theories, frameworks (conceptual relativism, social constructivism)
(E) Propositions or tokens of utterances (particularly those expressing personal preferences, future contingents, epistemic modals, aesthetic and moral predicates)	V- Context of assessment, e.g. taste parameter, assessor's/agent's sets of beliefs (New Relativism, epistemic relativism)

Table 1 Classificatory Definition of Relativism

The articles in Section I of this collection discuss the various forms of relativism outlined in the above table. The opening article, 'Relativism, Standards and Aesthetic Judgements' by James O. Young, distinguishes between various forms of aesthetic relativism and explores issues relevant to their correct understanding. 'Relativism and Our Warrant for Scientific Theories' by Paul Faulkner addresses some possible arguments in support of epistemic relativism, particularly when it comes to the justification of and warrant for scientific theories. If the anti-realist claim that justification is ultimately based on social warrant is correct, and if indeed there is significant diversity in what communities take to be warrant for beliefs, then relativism about scientific knowledge becomes a tenable position. Faulkner addresses this challenge.

The final three articles in Section I arise out of debates relevant to New Relativism. Max Kölbel compares the two forms that he thinks any relativist thesis could take: ‘indexical relativism’ and ‘genuine relativism’. Indexical relativism is the claim that the implicit indexicality of certain sentences is the only source of relativity. Genuine relativists, by contrast, believe that there is relativity not just at the level of sentences, but also at the level propositions or content. The response by Dan López de Sa in ‘The Many Relativisms and the Question of Disagreement’ and Max Kölbel’s rejoinder in ‘How to Spell Out Genuine Relativism and How to Defend Indexical Relativism’ clarify and advance this important debate further.

The second approach to defining relativism, DA, attempts to find a core common feature that can be seen at least as necessary, if not sufficient, for identifying an instance of the doctrine. Paul Boghossian, for instance, explains that ‘the relativist about a given domain, D, purports to have discovered that the *truths* of D involve an *unexpected* relation to a parameter’ (Boghossian 2006: 13). The view is advanced in different forms by Gilbert Harman, Robert Nozick, and Crispin Wright who think that what binds various forms of relativism is an underlying claim that the truth, the acceptability or the justification about one or more objects of belief has a hidden, often unnoticed, relationship to a parameter or domain. To take an example, moral relativism, according to this approach, is the claim that the truth or the justification of beliefs with a moral content depend on, and hence are relative to, specific cultural or moral codes. So the statement ‘it is wrong to sell people as slaves’ is elliptical for ‘it is wrong to sell people as slaves relative to the moral code of ...’. The resulting sentence turns out to be true depending on how we fill in the ‘...’. Thus, ‘it is wrong to sell people as slaves’ relative to the moral code of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ comes out true, while ‘it is wrong to sell people as slaves’ relative to the moral code of ancient Greece turns out to be false. The justifying thought is that there is no framework-independent or universal criterion for choosing between these differing frameworks.

The approach does lay out an important feature of the logic of relativising predicates, but, as the Max Kölbel’s Dan López de Sa debate in this collection indicates, it is not clear if the purely indexical form of this approach to relativism would give us a genuinely relativistic doctrine. The ancient doctrine of relativism, first proposed by Protagoras, centralised not just the claim that values are relative to particular frames of reference, but also that, while remaining constant or invariant, one and the same value is assessed differently in different frames of reference. The purely indexical form of DA does not allow this. Failure to emphasise this condition in any definition of relativism undermines its philosophical import and obliterates the distinction between relativism and variants of the principle of relativity (in the sense made familiar by Einstein). Paul Boghossian, as well as Crispin Wright, have noted this point. Boghossian, insists that relativism could not be just a thesis

about the content of certain sentences, to be of any philosophical significance, it has to be about the world and the facts about that world.

A correct construal of relativism about a given domain, D cannot locate the unexpected relationality in the *contents* of D's sentences. It must locate it, rather, in the *facts*. Relativism cannot properly be seen as correcting our view of what our sentences mean; it must rather be seen as correcting our view of what the facts are (Boghossian 2006: 19).

DA can also consist of a search for a common content to all relativistic positions. One suggestion is that all relativistic doctrines, ultimately, can be expressed in terms of alethic relativism or relativism about truth (see Baghramian 2004 and Kölbel 2011). Take any version of relativism as outlined in Table 1, the proposed relativisation of a particular object to a domain can be cashed out in terms of the truth and falsity of the relevant assertions falling within that domain. To take an example, moral relativism can be seen as an attempt to relativise the truth of the propositions of ethics (e.g. slavery is wrong) to a cultural or conceptual framework. Similarly with other objects and domains of relativisation. The approach however is susceptible to the famous self-refutation argument. Since Plato, the anti-relativists have claimed that relativism, if true, can be true only non-relativistically and if all relativistic claims are instances of a particular form of truth-claim, then they are all equally suspect.

Papers in Section II of this book examine a number of issues relevant to or inspired by alethic relativism. The section begins with Christoph Jamme's 'Cross-cultural Understanding: its Philosophical and Anthropological Problems' where he explores the conditions for representing 'the other' in philosophy, sociology and cultural studies and asks the foundational question: how do we come to represent the stranger or the other? One suggestion he pursues is that the arts, rather than truth bearing propositions only, may play a decisive role in this process. Steven D. Hales' chapter, 'Intuition, Revelation, and Relativism' controversially claims that philosophical propositions are merely relatively true, i.e. true relative to what he calls a 'doxastic perspective', defined at least in part by a non-inferential belief-acquiring method. Contemporary philosophers, he argues, base their views on rational intuition. Compare that to the claims made by Christian theologians who use exactly the same methodology, only replacing intuition with revelation. The conflicting claims in each domain, Hales claims, can be shown to be true from their distinct doxastic perspectives only.

The articles by Christopher A. Dustin and Robert Lockie question the truth and coherence of relativism. In the 'The Untruth in Relativism', Dustin reviews several forms of what he calls 'sophisticated' or coherent accounts of ethical relativism and finds them untrue. He concludes that their 'untruth' also shows that nonobjectivism about ethics must be false. Robert Lockie in 'Relativism and Reflexivity' develops a new version of the self-refutation argument against relativism. Relativists' standard defence against the charge of incoherence and inconsistency is that the self-refutation

argument presupposes an objectivist claim to truth and hence begs the question against them. Lockie allows that weaker varieties of relativism are not self-refuting, but argues that strong versions cannot escape the charge of incoherence. Anders Tolland in 'Iterated Non-Refutation: Robert Lockie on Relativism' objects to the presuppositions behind Lockie's argument—in particular to the underlying thought he attributes to Lockie that relativism involves 'some strong and untenable principle of tolerance and respect'. Lockie's rejoinder disputes the force of this interpretation.

4. Negative Definition

A third approach to defining relativism is to focus on what relativists deny. Defined negatively, relativism amounts to the rejection of a number of philosophical positions that are traditionally contrasted with it, chief among them are:

- (a) Universalism or the position that there could and should be universal agreement on matters of truth, goodness, beauty, meaningfulness, etc.
- (b) Objectivism or the position that truth and values are mind and context-independent.
- (c) Monism or the view that, in any given area or on any given topic, there can be no more than one correct opinion, judgement, or norm.

In certain respects ND is more fruitful than the approaches discussed above in that it captures some key features of a variety of relativistic positions. In particular it is a useful way of understanding the positions defended by feminist epistemologists, postmodernists, and cultural theorists accused of relativism. However, the worry with this particular approach is that it may be spreading the net for catching relativists too widely. This is not only true of Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida, who have continuously denied that their anti-objectivism amounts to relativism, but also of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's much discussed ideas of what he calls 'forms of life' and 'language games', as well as his use of imaginary cases of alien conceptual schemes and 'alternative forms of life' have provided a fertile ground for discussions of relativism. Various strands in Wittgenstein's writing in *On Certainty* provide further evidence. Briefly put, Wittgenstein seems to be supporting the view that there could be alternative, equally valid or effective, world-pictures (*weltbilder*) and the truth and objectivity of our beliefs are not grounded on anything that transcends our (local) practices. The relativistic implications of the view are evident. Hanjo Glock, for instance, has argued that Wittgenstein was a conceptual relativist and Barry Barnes and David Bloor have found support for their brand of epistemic relativism in

Wittgenstein's writing. Annalisa Coliva, on the other hand, rejects the relativistic readings of Wittgenstein (Coliva 2010).

The articles in Section III examine the relativistic implications of Wittgenstein's writing and come down on the opposite side of this debate. The varieties of interpretations of Wittgenstein's view on offer in this section and the conflicting positions defended by Simon Blackburn, Paul O'Grady, Bob Plant, Michael Kober, and Tracy Bowell are a testament to the difficulties facing any discussions of the alleged relativism of Wittgenstein.

There is a significant degree of disconnect between the various definitions of relativism offered here and the same is true of the papers collected in this book. The disconnect however shines light on the many faces of relativism and in the process may help us better understand this enduring philosophical problem.

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Relativism, Standards and Aesthetic Judgements

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Abstract

This paper explores the various available forms of relativism concerning aesthetic judgement and contrasts them with aesthetic absolutism. Two important distinctions are drawn. The first is between subjectivism (which relativizes judgements to an individual's sentiments or feelings) and the relativization of aesthetic judgements to intersubjective standards. The other is between relativism about aesthetic properties and relativism about the truth-values of aesthetic judgements. Several plausible forms of relativism about aesthetic properties are on offer, but relativism about the truth-values of aesthetic judgements is more elusive. In particular, John MacFarlane's approach to relativism is shown not to result in relativism about the truth-values of aesthetic judgements.

1 Introduction

In the past few years, a sophisticated literature has developed that defends a relativist semantics for certain classes of sentences. In this literature, the class of aesthetic judgements is often regarded as a good candidate for relativist treatment. Partly because much of this literature has been generated by writers without a clear understanding of aesthetic judgements, an inaccurate picture of aesthetic relativism has emerged. A relativist semantics that is satisfactory for, say, future contingents will not work for aesthetic judgements. This paper neither defends nor attacks relativism about aesthetic judgements. It simply attempts to clarify the sorts of aesthetic relativism on offer and, in particular, to investigate whether relativism about the truth-values of aesthetic judgements is possible. I will conclude that, although several plausible positions lead to relativism about aesthetic properties, relativism about truth-values of aesthetic judgements remains elusive.

2 Aesthetic Absolutism

Let us begin by clarifying the alternative to aesthetic relativism, namely aesthetic absolutism. Let us take A as an aesthetic judgement about work of art W . One might ask if A is true absolutely or only relatively. The aesthetic absolutist will say that the truth-value of a judgement such as A depends solely on facts about W . Hume wrote that the standard of judgements or, as he said, ‘all determinations of the understanding’, is ‘real matter of fact’ (Hume, 2005: 88). In other words, a judgement is true if and only if it accords with real (objective) matter of fact. The aesthetic absolutist (unlike Hume) believes that aesthetic judgements are no different in this respect from sentences about how many people are in a particular room. A is true because of certain facts about W (perhaps it participates in the Form of Beauty), and that is all there is to be said. More precisely, we may characterize this position as follows:

Aesthetic absolutism: A is true iff a proposition p exists such that A expresses p and the truthmaker for p is an objective matter of fact.

The crucial feature of aesthetic absolutism is the objectivity of truthmakers, in David Armstrong’s sense of the term (Armstrong, 1997: p. 128). Here, and elsewhere in this article, judgements are said to express propositions since this is common in the literature. Nothing turns on this. One could characterize aesthetic absolutism simply in terms of judgements and their truthmakers.

The aesthetic absolutist may allow that aesthetic judgements are indexed to particular contexts of use. (They may allow this, but they need not. Absolutists could have a Platonic ontology of artworks, maintain that they are eternal types and hold that all aesthetic judgements are about the eternal types and not in any way dependent on particular contexts. Dodd (2007) adopts an ontology of musical works that lends support to this position.) If the truth-values of aesthetic judgements depend on contexts of use, then the truth-value of A , for example, can vary with time and world. Suppose that W is Michelangelo’s *David* and A is the judgement that the *David* is beautiful. A possible world exists at which Michelangelo painted his sculpture lime green. Likely at this world, A is false. It is false because of facts about the *David* at that world. In the actual world there is a possible future time in which the sculpture is badly decayed or has been seriously defaced. Likely at that time, A is false – again because of objective matter of fact at that world. We may formulate a form of absolutism sensitive to context as the view that

Context-sensitive aesthetic absolutism: A is true at context of use C iff a proposition p exists such that A expresses p at C and p is true at C .

Here the context of use is simply the context in which the aesthetic judgement is made. Notice that, although the truth-values of aesthetic judgements depend on particular times, places and possible worlds, the standard of aesthetic judgements is still objective matter of fact: matter of fact at a particular context. This position remains firmly absolutist about aesthetic properties and the truth-values of aesthetic judgements. Objective matters of fact are still regarded as the truthmakers of aesthetic judgements. Truth-values are not indexed (in David Lewis' sense of the term) to particular speakers in a context (Lewis, 1998: p. 21).

MacFarlane imagines an aesthetic absolutism in which the truth-values of aesthetic judgements depend on how the world is when the judgement is made and on (what MacFarlane calls) the One True Aesthetic Standard (MacFarlane, 2005: p. 308). He characterizes this position thus (I have added my own name for the position and slightly rephrased):

Aesthetic standard absolutism: *A* is true at context of use *C* iff a proposition *p* exists such that

- (a) *A* expresses *p* in *C* and
- (b) *p* is true at the world of *C* and the One True Aesthetic Standard.

I do not believe that this position differs from aesthetic absolutism.

It is hard to know what the One True Aesthetic Standard could be here. The absolutist needs no standard besides how the world, or matter of fact, is. Individual preferences and shared aesthetic standards are completely irrelevant, from the absolutist perspective, to questions about whether a work possesses aesthetic properties and about the truth-values of aesthetic judgements. Perhaps MacFarlane thinks, in a manner reminiscent of Hume, that the One True Aesthetic Standard is provided by the judgements of qualified critics. Since the position under consideration is absolutism, critics will need to be so qualified as to be ideal and infallible. Let us suppose that this is what MacFarlane had in mind. If so, then *A* is true at context of use *C* iff a proposition *p* exists such that *A* expresses *p* and *p* is true at *C* and the ideal critic judges that *A* at *C*. Reference here to what the ideal critic judges is plainly otiose. Saying that an infallible critic judges that *A* is just another way of saying that *A*. For the absolutist, the One True Aesthetic Standard just is provided by what is true at *C* or, in other words, by Hume's matter of fact. Consequently, I do not see that aesthetic standard absolutism differs from context-sensitive aesthetic absolutism.

3 Aesthetic Subjectivism

Let us turn now to a consideration of the relativist alternatives to aesthetic absolutism. Two basic sorts of position are nowadays put forward as

the alternatives to aesthetic absolutism. The first alternative is variously formulated and has various names, but it is best described as subjectivism. On this view, the aesthetic value of an artwork is relative to the subjective feelings of audience members or (as I will call them) critics. Subjectivism is a form of relativism about aesthetic properties: works of art only have aesthetic properties relative to critics. The second sort of relativism holds that a given aesthetic judgement has different truth-values relative to different aesthetic standards. Maria Baghramian calls this strong alethic relativism (Baghramian, 2004: p. 128). Only the second sort is a genuine relativist semantics. It remains to be seen whether a genuine relativism about aesthetic judgements is available.

Let us begin by considering subjectivism. Subjectivism is the result of a particular view of aesthetic standards: they are held to be something like Hume's sentiments. That is, an aesthetic standard is a feeling of pleasure or, alternatively, distaste that a person feels upon contemplating a work of art. In an important respect subjectivism departs from Hume. Subjectivists, unlike Hume, believe that we make aesthetic judgements. According to subjectivism, an aesthetic judgement is a judgement about the sentiments of the critic who makes it as much as it is about a work of art. An aesthetic judgement is true when a critic making a judgement has the appropriate sentiments. Subjectivism may be formulated in these terms:

Aesthetic subjectivism: *A* as asserted by critic *S* is true at context of use *C* iff a proposition *p* exists such that

- (a) *A* expresses *p* at *C*, and
- (b) *p* is true at the world of *C* and the sentiments of *S* at *C*.

The introduction of reference to a critic and his sentiments introduces what Lewis calls an index. Crucially, according to subjectivism, aesthetic judgements are indexed to a subjective feeling of a critic. The truthmakers of aesthetic judgements are no longer restricted to objective matters of fact (in particular contexts).

Aesthetic subjectivism has the consequence that aesthetic judgements express different propositions when uttered by different critics. When *S*₁ asserts *A* it expresses something like

(*A*₁) *W* causes pleasing sentiments in *S*₁.

*S*₂ might assert that *A* is not true. This is to say something like

(*A*₂) *W* causes unpleasant sentiments in *S*₂.

Notice that *A*₁ and *A*₂ do not contradict each other. Both could be (absolutely) true. If aesthetic subjectivism is right, sincerely made aesthetic

judgements cannot be false, since they are simply expressions of a speaker's preferences. Given aesthetic subjectivism, no aesthetic judgement can be true as uttered by one speaker and false as uttered by another since two speakers cannot make the same aesthetic judgement. This is because all aesthetic judgements make reference to the speaker's own standards (that is, sentiments). If aesthetic subjectivism is correct, we are left with relativism about beauty (or any aesthetic property). The *David*, for example, is beautiful relative to some sentiments and not beautiful relative to others. Another way to put this point is to say that subjectivism is the view that aesthetic predicates such as 'is beautiful' are not monadic predicates. To say that something is beautiful (or possessed of any other aesthetic property) is to assert that a dyadic relation obtains between a critic and an artwork. That is, an artwork only possesses aesthetic properties in relation to (or relative to) a critic. This is, however, different from relativism about the truth-values of aesthetic judgements.

4 Aesthetic Perspectivism

Turn now to a consideration of relativism about the truth-values of aesthetic judgements. MacFarlane formulates a position that is supposed to provide us with this sort of relativism. MacFarlane believes that relativizing aesthetic judgements to contexts of assessment, we get relativism about the truth of such judgements. The context of assessment is the context in which someone assesses whether some aesthetic judgement is true. It can be identical to the context of use, but need not be. His position can be stated thus:

Aesthetic perspectivism: *A* is true at a context of use C_u and context of assessment C_a iff a proposition exists such that

- (a) *A* expresses *p* at C_u , and
- (b) *p* is true at the world of C_u and the aesthetic standards of an assessor at C_a .

My use of the term 'aesthetic perspectivism' is inspired by López de Sa, who speaks of this sort of position as the view that a sentence 'can be true *from a certain perspective* but false from another' (López de Sa, 2007: p. 272).

MacFarlane's approach here to aesthetic judgements is inspired by his treatment of the semantics of future contingents. Relativism about future contingents is the view that the truth-values of sentences vary from one context of assessment to another. Here different contexts of assessment are different times. Consider the sentence 'A sea battle will occur tomorrow.' In context C_1 (the day before the day of the predicted sea battle) the truth-value of this sentence is plausibly held to be indeterminate. In context C_2 (the day of the predicted sea battle), the truth-value of the sentence must be either

true or false (MacFarlane, 2003). MacFarlane has a reasonable case here for relativizing the truth of future contingents to contexts of assessment. Arguably, a matter of fact exists at C_2 that does not exist in C_1 . (I am not endorsing MacFarlane's position here. It can be challenged. See Dummett, 2004 and Westfall, 2006. I am just conceding that MacFarlane's position is a form of relativism about the truth-values of future contingents.) Notice that MacFarlane adopts a genuine relativism about truth-values of future contingents. The truth-value of a given sentence is held to be indeterminate in one context of assessment and possessed of a determinate truth-value in another context of assessment. The challenge is to show that this same approach can be extended to relativism about aesthetic judgements.

One might see the introduction of aesthetic standards in the formulation of aesthetic perspectivism as simply another way of introducing talk of the context of assessment. This may be, but it is important to see that it is reference to aesthetic standards, not to time (as is the case with future contingents), that is doing all of the semantic work when we consider aesthetic judgements. In order to see that this is so, imagine that two critics are assessing an aesthetic judgement A about W in different contexts (different places, times or worlds). By hypothesis, W is the same in both contexts, and both critics are employing the same aesthetic standards. Suppose that W is a poem composed in rhyming couplets and the aesthetic standards of both critics say that any poem that is composed in rhyming couplets is beautiful. It is hard to see how the fact that one critic is in Los Angeles in the present and the other is in Florence in the past is relevant to the truth-value of A . So long as critics in differing times (and places) share the same aesthetic standards, they will assign it the same truth-value. On the other hand, suppose that the critics are in the same time and place but they have different aesthetic standards. In this case, they may arrive at different verdicts and we can say that A is true relative to one set of standards and false relative to another. In general, W and the aesthetic standards accepted by the critics seem to be the only relevant factors affecting the assessment that they will give of A .

Even if attention is focused on relativity to aesthetic standards, a question about MacFarlane's account of aesthetic relativism remains to be addressed. It is not immediately obvious that aesthetic perspectivism differs from aesthetic subjectivism. Let us consider how an assessor S_2 at C_a would go about assessing an aesthetic judgement A made by S_1 about W at C_u . One obvious way to do this would be for S_2 to examine W . (I assume that W when examined by S_2 is unchanged since evaluated by S_1 . Without this assumption, any difference between the assessments of A offered by S_1 and S_2 could be explained by context-sensitive aesthetic absolutism.) S_2 would make a new judgement about W , on the basis of his aesthetic standards. Suppose that S_2 's aesthetic standards are simply his sentiments. S_2 would not so much be assessing the judgement of S_1 as making a new and independent

judgement about W . If aesthetic standards are Humean sentiments, then S_2 judges whether W causes pleasant or unpleasant sentiments in him. Any judgement he makes will be compatible with any aesthetic judgement made by S_j . In short, we have aesthetic subjectivism.

Perhaps, however, there is a way of understanding aesthetic standards that makes relativity about truth-values possible. Perhaps in C_a the assessor is applying some aesthetic standard that is not merely his own sentiments. That is, perhaps there is a standard against which the aesthetic judgements of more than one person can be judged, a standard that is not matter of fact. This is a key to seeing how relativism about the truth-values of aesthetic judgements, or aesthetic perspectivism, might be possible. In stating aesthetic perspectivism, MacFarlane speaks of ‘the aesthetic standards of the assessor’ (MacFarlane, 2005: p. 309; my italics), but these standards must be standards the assessor can share with another assessor. If not, the standards are simply sentiments and (as I have argued) aesthetic perspectivism collapses into aesthetic subjectivism.

Much of the literature on relativism about aesthetic judgements conflates aesthetic judgements about works of art with gustatory judgements and judgements about the sex appeal of movie stars. When we are dealing with gustatory judgements (and the sex appeal of movie stars) it is hard to see what the standard is besides Humean sentiments. Aesthetic judgements about artworks may be subject to a different sort of standard. The aesthetic absolutist, of course, believes that there is an objective standard of such judgements. There may also be standards that are not matters of fact or subjective sentiments. It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate such standards, but perhaps shared standards exist that are not those of the aesthetic absolutist.

One possible shared standard would result from an adaptation of Hume’s suggestion: one could say that the judgements of qualified critics are the standard. An ideal-critic theory is a modern version of Hume’s position and has its contemporary advocates. Such a theory is championed, for example, by Alan Goldman (Goldman, 1995). Aesthetic standards are the judgements of ideal critics. In a context of assessment, a person can ask whether some aesthetic judgement is in accord with the judgements of ideal critics. If so, it is true. This position is completely coherent, but if the aesthetic standards referred to in (b) of the account of aesthetic perspectivism are the judgements of ideal critics, then aesthetic perspectivism is not relativism about the truth of aesthetic judgements. Only a little reflection is needed to show that this is so.

Let us reflect for a moment on what makes an ideal critic ideal. Hume says that they are the critics with delicacy of taste. Perhaps a little more precisely we may say that ideal critics have a perfected capacity to detect aesthetic properties. Being ideal, these critics cannot be mistaken about the aesthetic properties that artworks possess. Nor, presumably, do ideal critics

disagree about which aesthetic properties are valuable. So, if the ideal-critic theory provides the right account of aesthetic standards, to say that an ideal critic judges that *A* is just to say that *A*. An aesthetic judgement is a judgement about the aesthetic properties some work possesses. Adding that ideal critics believe that the work has these properties adds nothing. This is all 'the aesthetic standards of an assessor at C_a ' adds to aesthetic perspectivism, if the ideal-critic theory provides the correct account of aesthetic standards. This point can be put in another way. According to the ideal-critic theory, the test of the truth of an aesthetic judgement is congruence with the judgements of ideal critics. The truth of an aesthetic judgement consists, however, in accord with matter of fact. So the ideal-critic theory is a form of aesthetic absolutism.

We need to pause a little and ask what an aesthetic standard might be that would make relativism possible. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a wide variety of definitions of the noun 'standard'. The most relevant one reads: 'A rule, principle, or means of judgement or estimation; a criterion, measure'. Here a standard is not determined by the judgements of ideal critics. Rather, they are abstract norms by which items are judged. One of the *OED*'s illustrations of the relevant usage of 'standard' is given as follows: 'the English reader must be cautioned against applying his English standards to the examination of the American system.' I am not certain what was at issue in this case; I assume that English readers were being enjoined not to judge certain American social institutions by their own standards. Let us suppose that social institutions are judged to be good to the extent that they perform some function. Performance of this function is what is measured by a standard. One standard of the judgement of social institutions might be that the good ones maximize the opportunity of individuals to act independently of any government action. Another standard might state that good institutions are the ones that ensure that people are treated in an egalitarian fashion. These principles could be used to judge, for example, the American health-care system. By American standards (limitation of government action is good), the system counts as good. By the standards of most other Western countries (egalitarian distribution of health care is good), it is not good. An aesthetic standard would have many of the characteristics of these standards of social institutions. In particular, such aesthetic standards would be propositions. As such, they could be adopted and employed by any number of critics.

These comments reveal how MacFarlane's approach to aesthetic relativism has gone wrong. Relativism about the truth of aesthetic judgements is not the result of introducing consideration of the aesthetic standards of an assessor at some context of assessment, which may be distinct from the context in which an aesthetic judgement is made. Rather, the crucial factor that makes such relativism possible is aesthetic standards by which the aesthetic judgements of more than one person can be judged. These

standards cannot be matters of fact or the judgements of an ideal critic (or aesthetic absolutism ensues). Rather they are an intersubjective measure of the performance of a function. To call these measures intersubjective is to say that more than one critic can adopt them. The truth of an aesthetic judgement depends on how a world is (in particular, how some work *W* is at the world) at a particular time *and* on the intersubjective aesthetic standards adopted by a speaker. More formally, this position may be characterized as:

Aesthetic perspectivism*: *A* as asserted by critic *S* is true at a context of use *C* iff a proposition exists such that

- (a) *A* expresses *p* at *C*, and
- (b) *p* is true at the world of *C* and on the intersubjective aesthetic standards *I* adopted by *S* at *C*.

This position is a variation on aesthetic perspectivism. The essential difference is that aesthetic perspectivism* makes clear that the truthmakers for aesthetic judgements include intersubjective aesthetic standards, and these can vary from context to context and critic to critic. Unlike context-sensitive absolutism, aesthetic perspectivism* denies that the truthmakers for aesthetic judgements are purely objective.

Aesthetic perspectivism* is not a form of subjectivism. The truth of *A* does not depend on some individual's sentiments. To assert *A* is not to express a proposition about what some individual finds pleasing. Indeed, someone could judge that *A* is true (by a certain standard) and yet not find it pleasing. (We often do this. For example, a person acknowledges that *Die Meistersinger* is a great work of art by a standard he accepts, but says that he does not enjoy listening to it.) As noted above, if aesthetic subjectivism is right, we cannot make mistakes in making aesthetic judgements. On the other hand, if aesthetic perspectivism* is true, we can make mistakes in making aesthetic judgements in a way that aesthetic subjectivism does not permit. I can, for example, judge that *A* is true on some standard (say, aesthetically valuable works probe human experience), but it is actually false (the work does not probe human experience).

Aesthetic perspectivism* is not subjectivism, but it is not relativism about the truth-values of aesthetic judgements. It is essentially the view that the truthmakers of aesthetic judgements are compounded of two elements: the way that some work is in some context and the intersubjective standards adopted by the maker of the judgement in that context. If we accept that meanings are given by truth-conditions, what an aesthetic judgement means depends in part on the standards adopted by the maker of the judgement. As uttered by me '*W* is a beautiful work of art' is true (since I have certain standards of beauty). As uttered by you, '*W* is not a beautiful work of art' is true (since the standards that you adopt differ from mine). We are not

contradicting each other. You are saying that the work is poor by your standards while I am saying that the work is good by my standards. If you were, without changing your standards, to assert that ‘*W* is a beautiful work of art’ you would say something false but, as uttered by you, this means something different than when it is uttered by me.

It seems, then, that aesthetic perspectivism* is not the view that a single aesthetic judgement can have two truth-values. The view that an aesthetic judgement can have more than one truth-value was always going to be a difficult challenge since there is a compelling general argument against any such relativism. This sort of relativism is the view that two judgements can be alike in meaning but have different truth-values. This position seems to be incompatible with the view that the meaning of a sentence is given by its truth-conditions. If the meaning of a judgement is given by its truth-conditions (and truth-conditions determine truth-value), it is hard to see how two judgements can be alike in meaning but different in truth-value. (For a version of this argument see Newton-Smith, 1981: pp. 34ff.). This argument works only on the assumption that meanings are given by truth-conditions, but this is a widely held and plausible view.

When I introduced aesthetic perspectivism*, it initially seemed to be a version of Baghramian’s strong alethic relativism. It is better, however, to regard aesthetic perspectivism* as a form of relativism about aesthetic properties. It amounts to the view that a work of art does not have aesthetic properties independently of aesthetic standards. Some work is, say, beautiful since certain standards establish criteria for beauty. Performing semantic ascent on this view gives rise to the illusion that we are dealing with strong alethic relativism. That is, if we have relativism about truth-values, this is only because of the semantic ascent from

(P) *W* has aesthetic property *P* relative to aesthetic standard *I*

to

(T) It is true that *W* has aesthetic property *P* relative to aesthetic standard *I*.

If this is the right way to think of aesthetic perspectivism*, it is, like subjectivism, a form of relativism about aesthetic properties (and aesthetic value).

5 Conclusion

Certainly some varieties of aesthetic relativism are cogent and even plausible positions. Both subjectivism and aesthetic perspectivism* lead to relativism about aesthetic properties. The difference is that subjectivism makes aesthetic properties depend on subjective feelings (Hume’s sentiments),