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COMMENTS ON MICHAEL NELSON'S
'TIME AND PERSON IN THOUGHT'
</div>

1. Two claims

i.   Linguistic and psychological considerations do not decide between contextualism and relativism.
ii.   Metaphysical considerations do: we should be relativists about a parameter just in case property instantiation itself is relativized to it.

I concede i, in the weak sense that we don't have decisive linguistic or psychological evidence. I reject the strong claim that such evidence could not be decisive.

I reject ii. I don't think relative truth requires relative instantiation. Like Austin, I believe that the fundamental notion of truth is that of being *true of* a situation.

2. The case against relativism

[α] "For a sentence S (which is used to make assertions and express beliefs) to have a meaning, or semantic content, is for S to express a proposition that represents something as being some way or other. In virtue of this, we speak derivatively of S representing things. 'Snow is white' represents snow as white, while 'The U.S. President is male' represents the property being U.S. President as uniquely instantiated, and being male as instantiated by whatever instantiates being U.S. President. A meaningful sentence of this sort represents the universe (or parts of it) as being a certain way (or ways). Its truth conditions follow from this; if S (simply) represents A as being B (and nothing else), then S is true iff A is B. We have no idea what it is to be representational, and hence meaningful, apart from having such (monadic) truth conditions."
<div align="right">S. Soames, 'True At.' Analysis Reviews 2011 71(1): 125</div>

This is an argument against relativism of any kind. It is invalid: for all we are told, whether A is B might be a relative matter (e.g. true at some times but false at others), in which case whether S is true is likewise relative. Mike improves the argument:

[β] "What it is for a sentence to have a meaning, in the most basic case of a context-invariant, simple atomic sentence of the form *Fa*, is for it to represent a particular object as being a certain way. But a thing is a certain way *simpliciter*: that is, a thing simply instantiates (or does not instantiate, as the case may be) a property. This leads then to an atomic sentence *Fa* being true or false simpliciter." (p. 13-4)

This brings out the key presupposition of [α]: being a certain way is *binary* property-instantiation. Mike defends relativism by rejecting this presupposition but I think it is rather attractive. So, I accept [β] as a sound argument. Mike continues:

[γ] "The same is true of atomic propositions. An atomic proposition represents a thing as being a certain way and it either is or is not that way *simpliciter.*" (p.14)

I am skeptical of propositional structure but for the sake of argument I am ready to grant the distinction between atomic and non-atomic propositions. What I object to is the idea that a proposition can represent a thing as being a certain way. I think propositions are ways things can be represented as being.

3. Relativism defended

Consider the sentence 'Sam has the queen of spades.' I agree this sentence represents a certain thing as being a certain way. The standard view is that the thing it represents is Sam and the way it represents him is having the queen of spades. But the standard view has a hard time accommodating the fact that the sentence can be true or false depending on what situation it is used to describe. Suppose Bill is playing two games of internet poker simultaneously; in one game he has the queen of spades and in the other he does not. The sentence is true when it is used to talk about the first game but false when it is used to talk about the second. So, here is an alternative to the standard view: 'Sam has the queen of spades' as uttered in one context (where it is part of the common ground that we are discussing the first game) represents the first game as being such that Sam has the queen of spades in it, while as uttered in another context (where it is part of the common ground that we are discussing the second game) represents the second game as being such that Sam has the queen of spades in it. In different contexts, the sentence represents different situations as being the same way. The way those situations are represented as being is the proposition expressed by the sentence.

Let's make this idea a bit more precise. Say that we have a function $[\![\cdot]\!]^c$ which assigns semantic values to linguistic expressions relative to contexts. The semantic value of a declarative sentence is a property of situations, which we will call a proposition. (The proposition expressed by 'Sam has the queen of spades' is a property of situations p such that for all possible situations s, s instantiates p just in case Sam has the queen of spades in s.) Let's say we also have another function $[\cdot]^c$ which assigns to linguistic expressions targets relative to contexts. (Intuitively, the target of an expression in a context is what the expression is used to talk about in that context.) The target of a declarative sentence is a situation. A declarative sentence S is true relative to context c iff $[S]^c$ instantiates $[\![S]\!]^c$.[*] This is a relativist semantics that eschews indices altogether: sentences (as used in a context) are true or false *simpliciter.*[**]

4. Methodology

In a way, my view is similar to Mike's: I think propositional truth is situational and situations could be used to represent times. (We could say, for example, that a proposition is true at t iff some situation that occurs at t instantiates it. This makes 'Sam has the queen of spades' true at a time when Sam plays two games and has the queen of spades in one, but not in the other. Those who think it should be false or without truth-value can come up with different definitions of truth at t in terms of truth of s.) But Mike and I disagree about how to argue for such a view. He thinks we need to show that reality itself is tensed, I don't. What we need is better insight into how our words represent reality, whatever reality is fundamentally like.

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[*] This would need to be refined to account for contexts where $[\cdot]^c$ is undefined. For example, in some (perhaps all) contexts 'Snow is white' does not target any situation and is true just in case *typical* actual situations involving snow are such that snow is white in them.

[**] Terminological note: this semantics is relativist in the sense in which Mike uses the term (propositional truth is relative to some parameter) but it is contextualist in MacFarlane's sense (sentential truth is only relative to parameters initiated by the context of use).