

A SEMANTIC APPROACH TO MORAL RELATIVISM

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Abstract

In this paper I aim to give a semantic account of moral relativism, that roughly advocates the idea that the truth or falsity of moral judgements is not absolute but only relative to the moral standards of different cultures or communities. I will first examine Kölbel's relativism regarding predicates of personal taste in order to assess its capacity to account for faultless disagreement in culinary or aesthetic matters. The idea of disagreement without fault is, in fact, very intuitive in these areas, and conveys the idea that when each of two different speakers utter, respectively, a pair of mutually negated sentences -or, in other words, contradictory statements- neither of them must be at fault. In order to understand Kölbel's proposal of semantic relativism I will first briefly review the core concepts of Kaplan's two-dimensional semantics, which will provide me with a very necessary set of semantic tools to assess the truth-value of non-objective propositions -may these be of aesthetic, culinary or moral nature-. Once the relativist semantic discourse and its core concepts are clarified, I intend to apply it to the moral sphere, in order to evaluate whether the intuition of faultless disagreement should be preserved in matters regarding morality. In these ponderations, I will adduce some of the premises of moral realism, the metaethical opponent of moral relativism, which will help me gain a better understanding of the latter's metaethical implications. Lastly, I want to conclude that Kölbel's semantic relativism and its preservation of disagreement without fault is legitimately applicable to moral claims.

Key words: moral relativism, faultless disagreement, circumstance of evaluation, context of utterance, semantic relativism, moral realism

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This paper is strategically divided into three sections. The first one contains a general overview of Kaplan's two-dimensional semantics, which will be useful in the further sections to gain a general understanding of the core concepts of a relativist semantics. The notions of context and circumstance of evaluation will be of crucial importance throughout this paper, insofar as any semantic analysis after Kaplan will not only frequently employ them, but also base their theses on which of these two notions they attribute most weight to. The second section contains a study of semantic relativism as opposed to contextualism, only to conclude that the former offers a very good account of the intuition of faultless disagreements occurring in matters of taste. Finally, the third section aims to conduct a semantic analysis of moral claims, and for that I will not only consider relativism in its semantic form, but also pay attention to the metaethical presuppositions that it entails. It is widely known that moral relativism seems to trigger very negative reactions insofar as it requires that moral truth be relativized to the moral standards of different communities. However, I shall argue that

it needs to be viewed as nuanced, and that the fact that it semantically entails faultless disagreements does not imply that we should subscribe to the idea that any set of moral values is to be seen as good.

1. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF KAPLAN'S TWO-DIMENSIONAL SEMANTICS: Context-sensitivity as a turning point in the concept of reference

The meaning of an utterance has historically been equated to its referent, whether it be an object -in the case of a term of definite description- or a proposition, which bears a set of truth-values. A serious discussion of context dependence was virtually absent in the work of prominent semanticists such as Frege and Russell. The latter's emphasis on rigid designation, for instance, only clues the disregard -or should I say inattention-, shown toward context as a relevant factor when it comes to shed light on the concept of reference. Only P. F. Strawson, in his reflections on the nature of reference, emphasized the importance of context in semantic analysis. These reflections triggered an in-depth study of indexicals that would finally put an end to a tradition that had remained oblivious to context-sensitivity, and that study we owe to D. Kaplan. Therefore, I deem adequate to outline the basics of his theory, in order to take a closer look into the notions of context of use and circumstance of evaluation, which will be central to the issues to be discussed throughout this paper.

1.1. KAPLAN'S THEORY OF INDEXICALS AS THE PRECEDENT OF SEMANTIC RELATIVISM

1.1.1 A historical background to Kaplan's two-dimensional semantics

Although the meticulous exam of the context dependence in the case of indexicals and its merge with intensional semantics is notoriously attributed to Kaplan, it had previously been noticed by prominent semanticists. Frege himself realized the sensitive nature of indexicals to context, and later Strawson, in a more elaborate manner, stressed the role of the utterance -the occurrence of a proposition in a given context- in the process of determining the truth-value of a proposition. Kaplan also considers Carnap and his distinction between intension and extension when coining the concept of content, which I shall clarify later in this paper. Let us have a very brief look at these historical antecedents of Kaplan's discussion of indexicals in his paper "On Demonstratives".

Fregean intuitions about the distinct semantic nature of indexicals

Kaplan is indeed much in debt with anterior semanticists insofar as these had previously stressed the importance of context in the determination of reference in general, not only in relation to indexical expressions. The recognition of the role of

context in semantics traces so far back as Frege. He shows to be perfectly aware of the idea that certain terms refer to different objects when the time of utterance is shifted. He expresses this point clearly with the following statement (Frege, 1956, p. 293):

If someone wants to say the same today as he expressed yesterday using the word 'today', he must replace this word with 'yesterday'. Although the thought is the same its verbal expression must be different so that the sense, which would otherwise be affected by the differing times of utterance, is readjusted.

It is indeed conspicuous that context dependence is the core of reference when examining pure indexicals and demonstratives. No semanticist should overlook the role of context in determining the reference of indexicals, let alone Fregean semantics.

Strawson's contribution to context dependence

A more sophisticated approach to context dependence is found in P. F. Strawson's work, more concisely in his article 'On Referring'. He considers the definite description 'The king of France' and points out that, although it displays no content - since no person has so far fit the description-, the sentence that might contain such an expression is not meaningless. We simply cannot say that it is true or false, it lacks truth value because no one is mentioned in that particular use of the expression. The conclusion that Strawson reaches, in an attempt to reconcile meaning and truth value, reads as follows (1950, p. 326):

"Mentioning", or "referring", is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do. Mentioning, or referring to, something is a characteristic of a use of an expression, just as "being about" something, and truth-or falsity, are characteristics of a use of a sentence.

These considerations represent a shift of focus from the propositional content of a certain expression to the *utterance of the expression* that contains that propositional content, insofar as the former is no longer considered as the only relevant feature in semantic analysis. In fact, it has been now established that contextual factors -such as location, time or utterer of the expression- play an essential part in the determination of reference, may this be an object or a truth-value.

Carnap and the concept of intension

Carnap suggests that the Fregean distinction between sense and reference be replaced by that of intension and extension. While extension is equivalent to the concept of reference, intensions are conceived in modal semantics as a function from possible worlds to extensions. The intension of a proper name or a definite description

is an individual concept, whereas he claims the intension of a predicate to be a property. If an individual concept is combined with a property to form a sentence, then its intension is a proposition. Carnap puts it in the following terms (1947, p. 27)

The *extension of a sentence* is its truth-value [...] The *intension of a sentence* is the proposition expressed by it. Consider the predicator 'H' and the individual constant 's' combined by juxtaposition. [In the sentence 'Scott is human'] we recognize that the intension of 's' is the individual concept Walter Scott, and the intension of 'H' the property 'Human'. Thus the resultant intension of the sentence is the proposition that Walter Scott is human.

When a proposition, namely an intension, is considered relative to a possible world, the result is a truth-value. The notion of intension has been much taken into account as the pillar on which Kaplan bases his concept of circumstance of evaluation, and the expression is frequently used as synonymous with what he refers to as *content*.

1.1.2 The fundamental notions of *context* and *circumstances of evaluation*

In this section I aim to provide an extended explanation of the concepts of *context* and *circumstance*, and for that I shall first examine Kaplan's "two obvious principles" -those are his words, whether they are obvious or not is to be pondered once they have been reviewed-. Kaplan did indeed coin two main principles about the nature of reference when it comes to indexicals, for which he elaborates numerous arguments. Although the principles themselves draw attention to -at least- seemingly straightforward points, it is the process of proving them what interests me and, ultimately, digs into the very foundations of two-dimensional semantics. Let us now consider the first one (Kaplan, 1989, p. 492):

Principle 1: *The referent of a pure indexical depends on the context, and the reference of a demonstrative depends on the associated demonstration.*

The first principle anticipates the most essential property of indexicals and demonstratives, that is context dependence. Let us put forward a glaring example of a pure indexical, the pronoun 'I'. If both Mary and Barbara say 'I ate a piece of cake', the proposition expressed by this sentence changes its meaning radically when each of them utters it. When Mary utters 'I' in this sentence, it is meant that the very utterer, in this case Mary, had a piece of cake; and the same can be inferred when Barbara utters it, only that it is now Barbara who had the pleasure. If the principle of compositionality is duly applied to this expression, the proposition expressed changes when the meaning of its constituents varies. Therefore, if an indexical happens to be involved in the sentence, and the meaning of an indexical depends on the context of utterance, then the whole proposition lays its weight on the context, in this case the identity of the

utterer -as we are dealing with a personal pronoun-. When a demonstrative is used in a sentence, we also need to resort to the context of utterance to determine the proposition expressed, only that the relevant contextual feature will be the subject's demonstrative gesture that accompanies their utterance. Now, let us analyze the second of the aforementioned principles (Kaplan, 1989, p. 492):

Principle 2: *Indexicals, pure and demonstrative alike, are directly referential.*

The second principle reveals the presence of another important feature of the meaning of indexicals: the semantic property of being directly referential. Nonetheless, and before diving into further philosophical considerations, I shall at this point draw attention to an underlying conceptual distinction that pervades Kaplan's discourse, which will enable the acquisition of a felicitous understanding of his semantics. We must thus consider that he slides back and forth between two metaphysical frameworks: (1) a picture of **structured propositions**, that Kaplan owes to Russellian semantics and considers propositions as structured content. In the sentence "The sun is shining", we can easily distinguish two elements: (a) the property of "shining" and (b) the expression "the sun", which is taken to be the propositional component. This picture is presupposed along with that of (2) **possible worlds**, which is perfectly compatible with Fregean semantics and explicitly used in Kripke's work. According to this picture, propositions are functions from possible worlds to truth values. Let us now view the same sentence that we took as an example before -that is, "The sun is shining"- within this framework: now the proposition expressed is considered in various possible worlds, each of which will yield a truth value. For instance, if PW_1 is a world where there is a sun and it is, in fact, shining, the proposition expressed by "The sun is shining" will be true. If, on the contrary, we consider a PW_2 where there is no sun, then the proposition expressed will be false. It is of paramount importance to remember this distinction; otherwise Kaplan's semantic considerations might seem incongruent or unclear. However, it must be taken into account that Kaplan is somehow skeptical about presupposing the absolute validity of either of these pictures (1989, p. 493):

It seems to be that a truly semantical idea should presuppose neither picture, and be expressible in terms of either. Kripke's discussion of rigid designators is, I believe, distorted by an excessive dependence on the possible worlds picture and the associated semantical style.

I may now proceed to elucidate what Kaplan means when he states that indexicals are directly referential. He claims that he intends "to use 'directly referential' for an expression whose referent, once determined, is taken as fixed for all possible circumstances" (1989, p. 493). An attempt to analyze this allegation might involve distinguishing two elements in it: first, we should notice that the expression "once *determined*" implies that there is a procedure through which we take what is said and

assign an appropriate referent. Suffice it to say that this mechanism of reference will be of a particular nature in the case of indexicals. Secondly, attention should be drawn to the fact that “[the referent] is taken as fixed for all *possible worlds*”. This part of the statement implies that there is an aftermath to the determination of the referent, and it entails operating according to the metaphysical framework of the possible worlds. Now we are fully entitled to pose the following questions: (1) What is the nature of the procedure through which the referent of an indexical expression is fixed? And (2) How do we evaluate reference according to the *possible world* picture? To answer these questions, Kaplan distinguishes two critical concepts (1989, p. 494):

We must distinguish possible occasions of *use* -which I call *contexts*- from possible circumstances of *evaluation* of what was said on a given occasion of use. Possible circumstances of evaluation I call *circumstances* [...] A directly referential term *may* designate different objects when used in different contexts. But when evaluating what was said in a given context, only a single object will be relevant to the evaluation in all circumstances.

The importance of this distinction when it comes to determining the referent of an indexical expression is indisputable, since context dependence is intrinsic to the very nature of reference in indexicals. Nonetheless, we ought not wipe the *possible worlds* picture from the concept of reference, since it is essential to a complete semantic analysis. Let us illustrate the importance of **context** and **circumstance** in the determination of the reference of an indexical with the sentence “She was in Paris”. To evaluate the proposition expressed, first we need to determine the reference of the term ‘she’, a pure indexical. In a context C_1 , Mary uttered this sentence and, therefore, -as the indexical involved happens to be a personal pronoun- the reference of the indexical coincides with the subject that uttered it, so in this case “she” = Mary. Once the object has been identified in a given context, then this object and no other will be the only one relevant to circumstance. This can also roughly be put this way: the utter context dependence of indexicals results in a constant function of a -previously contextually selected- indexical expression from possible worlds to objects. The function from possible contexts to utterers is variable -in C_1 , ‘she’ may refer to Mary; in C_2 , it may refer to ‘Barbara’-, while the function from possible worlds to objects remains constant because the evaluation takes place whenever the relevant context has been selected.

1.1.3 Character and content

Context and circumstances of evaluation are indubitably useful as constituents of a valid and more inclusive framework in which a renovated concept of reference emerges. Propositional content has been considered as a property of expressions in *use*, where context presents itself as inescapable to the determination of truth value, which has now been relativized. Once contextual relevance has been made essential in his

semantic analysis, Kaplan deems adequate to embed the concepts of context and circumstance in a larger scheme where they are the constituents of two functions. In this scheme, we may look two fundamental notions: (1) the idea of **content**, which Kaplan defines as “a function from circumstances of evaluation to an appropriate extension” (1989, p. 502), and (2) the notion of **character**, which is a function from *contexts* to contents (Kaplan, 1989, p. 506). Or, as Rabern puts it (2016, p. 3):

Kaplan insisted on a two-step semantic procedure, which resolved all context-sensitivity before proceeding, and which distinguished between two kinds of meaning, the *character* and the *content* of an expression. In Kaplan’s semantic theory these two aspects of meaning play different roles: the content is the information asserted by means of a particular utterance, whereas, the character of an expression encodes what any utterance of the expression would have as content

The following diagram might perhaps be helpful in illustrating the relationship between content and character, and then some examples will be put forward (Kaplan, 1989, p. 506):

CHARACTER:	Context \Rightarrow CONTENT:	Circumstance \Rightarrow EXTENSION
		(w,t) (reference)
t = time		
w= possible world		

At this stage I would like to consider a few examples of sentences where both their content and character are analyzed, and these instances will strategically be conceived to display cases in which differences in the nature of these two functions occur. With this purpose in mind, let us now look at the following pair of sentences:

- (1) I am Haizea
- (2) This is Bilbao

To determine their character, we must first turn to the context of utterance. It is evident that, in (1), ‘I’ being a personal pronoun implies that the object that we are seeking to identify is an agent involved in the utterance. Let us assume that in C_1 , ‘I’ refers to Haizea, the utterer of the expression. The content of the expression ‘I’ is a person, Haizea; and the content of the whole sentence is a truth value, which is ‘true’ if, indeed, Haizea was the utterer of that sentence. Once the content of C_1 is established, we find that an analysis of the circumstance is unnecessary, since the extension has already been fixed in the context. The same applies in (2), only that ‘this’ implies that the object that we are seeking to identify has been pointed at by a demonstrative gesture when it was uttered. Let us assume that in C_1 , ‘this’ refers to Bilbao, the place of utterance. The content of the demonstrative indexical ‘this’ is a place, Bilbao,

provided that whoever uttered (2) pointed at the city to demonstrate it, -for example in a situation where they are at a lookout where you can easily point to the whole valley-. The content of the whole sentence is a truth value, which is true iff (a) Bilbao was the place that was demonstrated at the lookout and (b) we assume the place where a town is situated is essential for being the town it is. Therefore, the *function of the character* is variable, while the *function of the content* is a constant one in both cases.

Now I would like to remark that the presence of indexicals in these two examples is not the reason why the function of the content is constant. In (1), when the indexical 'I' is matched with the person 'Haizea' then if we substitute 'I' for 'Haizea' in we have a necessary logical truth -Haizea is Haizea-. Therefore, there are no counterfactual circumstances in which to analyze the sentence; in all possible worlds, if indeed 'I' refers to 'Haizea' then (1) is necessarily true. The exact same reasoning applies to (2): the determination of the reference of the indexical 'here' yields a trivial A=A type of identity. Their content is fixed because their sentence structure is that of an identity, so the indexical in question always equates the other constituent of the proposition. There may be cases of sentences including indexicals whose content is not fixed, although their character is. This brings me to the next pair of examples that I would like to examine:

- (3) The Eiffel tower is here
- (4) The king of France is bald

Let us first determine their character, and for that we must first turn to the context of utterance. It is evident that, in (3), 'here' being a place indexical implies that the object that we are seeking to identify is the location of the utterance. Let us assume that in C_1 , 'here' refers to Paris, the place where (3) was uttered. The content of the expression 'here' is a place, Paris; and the content of the whole sentence is a truth value, which is 'true' if, indeed, Paris was the place where that sentence was uttered. Once the content of C_1 is established, we still find the analysis of the circumstance necessary, since there might be a PW_1 -the actual one, for instance- in which the Eiffel tower is in fact in Paris, but in another world PW_2 the Eiffel tower might never have been built, and so on. Therefore, both the *function of the character* and the *function of the content* are variable in both cases. Yet another different pair of sentences will give us the chance to examine again the variability of these functions:

- (5) Albert is bald
- (6) The result of the sum 2+2 is an unlucky number

In these cases, we encounter no indexicals; in fact, the individual concepts -in Carnap's terms- 'Albert' and 'the result of the sum 2+2' are rigid designators. Albert being a proper name, refers to the individual who is so named in every context.

Otherwise we would have to inquire along these lines: "In which context is 'Albert' the person 'Albert'? Obviously, in *all* contexts. The same applies to the definite description 'The result of the sum $2+2$ ', which is indeed a rigid definite description due to its mathematical nature, which exhibits a modal necessity. Therefore, the *function of the character* is constant here - Kaplan himself admits that nonindexicals have clearly a fixed character (1989, p. 506). Nonetheless, as a two-step process we may now inquire about the nature of the content in (3) and (4). It has been now established that the individual concept of (3) is the person named Albert, and the number four is what 'The result of $2+2$ ' rigidly designates in (4). But it is not trivial to ask now "Under which circumstances is it true that Albert is bald?", because this question might allow answers such as: (a) It is true *iff* we consider a world in which Albert exists -e. g. the actual one- *and* he is bald, or (b) It is false *iff* although Albert exists in the world considered, he is not in fact bald. Analogously, we might ask "Under which circumstances is it true that the number four is an unlucky number?", because this question might allow answers such as: (c) It is true *iff* we consider a world in which the number is indeed an unlucky number, or (d) It is false *iff* we consider a world -not the actual one, for sure- where human beings are entirely rational and cast superstitions like these aside. We must thus conclude that the *function of the character* is constant, while the *function of the content* is variable here.

Now, as the reader must have guessed, my point is that there can be four possible of combinations, three of which we have analyzed: (a) variable character *and* content -as in (3) and (4)-, (b) fixed character and variable content -as in (5) and (6)-, (c) variable character and fixed content -as in (1) and (2)- and finally, (d) fixed character *and* content. I think it is quite interesting to discuss a pair of examples of the last kind:

(7) Norma Jeane Baker is Marilyn Monroe

(8) The result of the sum $2+2$ is 4

In these cases, we encounter no indexicals; in fact, all the terms involved are rigid designators. Norma Jeane Baker being a proper name, it refers to the individual who is so named in every context. The same applies to the definite description 'The result of the sum $2+2$ ', which is indeed rigid due to its mathematical nature. These examples resemble (1) and (2) in that they represent identities. I would be inclined to believe that this is another kind of identity, e. g. a non-trivial $A=B$. However, it also seems to me that both the *function of character* and the *function of content* are constant. Now, I think that at least (7) correlates with the classic 'Hesperus is Phosphorus', whose reference, according to Frege, is fixed when the sense is elucidated. However, does the concept of sense not involve a kind of contextual analysis? Some philosophers, such as Stephen Schiffer, say so indeed, about both (7) and 'Hesperus is Phosphorus'. They argue that proper names carry a hidden indexical which refers to a mode of presentation of the referent. However, on a Kripkean and Kaplanian view of proper names as directly

referential expressions, there is no contextual dependence. They simply work as rigid designators like the aforementioned 'Albert' or 'the result of the sum 2+2'.

3. THE BIRTH OF SEMANTIC RELATIVISM: Faultless disagreement as a pivotal notion in the semantic approach to predicates of taste

In this section I aim to review the theory of semantic relativism, whose central thesis is that the truth-value of a proposition varies according to certain parameters that ought to be incorporated to the circumstance of evaluation, over and above the possible world index. We can track down the roots of this allegation to the analysis of predicates of personal taste, which are taken as the paradigm of expressions containing what it might be called subjective language. There is, indeed, a wide array of terms whose referent cannot be determined by looking at empirical data, and the expressions containing these terms are in need of a valid semantic framework that can elucidate their meaning. A remarkable feature of sentences containing this kind of language is that their truth-value is relative to certain standards that utterers tacitly accept. Now, it is the semanticists' job to determine the *nature* of these standards -whether they are standards of taste, morality, etc.-, and **the way they should be incorporated in a semantic framework** -they might be considered either as bound to the *context of utterance* or as embedded in the *circumstances of evaluation*-. The examination of the nature of the standards comes with the decision to keep to a certain subcategory of subjective language -that may be aesthetics, morality or personal taste, among others-. Moreover, reflections on their semantic placement have led to the formulation of two powerful semantic frameworks: contextualism and relativism. It is now my intention to limit myself to the analysis of predicates of personal taste, and examine contextualist arguments in order to unearth the motivations for the choice of semantic relativism.

3.1 CONTEXT-SENSITIVITY AND TEMPORALISM

A suitable starting point for understanding the concepts of contextualism and relativism might entail discerning between the analysis of context-sensitive sentences, which typically contain indexicals, and the study of indexical-free expressions from a temporalist perspective. This difference will hopefully hint theoretical presuppositions of both the contextualist and the relativist stance, which I shall certainly clarify further in this section. I will at this point put forward a pair of examples of context-sensitive sentences, whose analysis we are already familiar with:

(1) *She* is in Texas

(2) Napoleon was *here*

Context-sensitivity is clearly inescapable if we are to analyze these sentences, for they contain various kinds of indexicals: (1) contains a personal pronoun, which means

that we should contextually determine the identity of a certain agent; (2) involves a temporal adverb or a spatial indexical, which leads us to establish the place of utterance. The truth-value of these sentences depend on the reference of the indexical that they respectively contain. We are at this stage more than familiar with this procedure: the reference of these indexicals is to be fixed when examining their context of utterance. I would like to propose one more pair of sentences, where indexicals seem to be absent:

(3) It is Monday

(4) The text was written in winter

These sentences certainly have a temporal nature, but they do not seem to contain time indexicals, which we typically associate with expressions such as 'now' or 'today'. Therefore, should we consider (3) and (4) as *tensed*, or as *tenseless* propositions? Let us at least sketch a definition of these notions. *Tensed propositions* are those that contain a reference to time, e. g. sentences that contain indexicals, and whose content is therefore fixed in the context. *Tenseless propositions* do not contain an overt reference to time, as, I would say, is the case of (3) and (4). This pair of notions correlates with two main theories: eternalism and temporalism. I shall now turn to Richard (1981, p. 1), who grants accurate definitions of these views:

All sentences in English are such that, if they express a proposition relative to a time *t*, then they express (relative to *t*) a proposition which cannot change truth-value over time. Let us call this view *eternalism*. The other view, that at least some sentences of English express propositions which can change truth value over time, we will call *temporalism*.

Eternalism holds that all sentences express tensed propositions, since these cannot change truth-value over time. However, for sentences to express propositions relative to a time *t*, it seems that they should contain an overt reference to time -e. g., a time indexical-. How then do eternalists analyze expressions such as (3) and (4)? Richard argues that "a sentence such as ['Nixon is president'] contains an implicit reference. ['Nixon is president'] is elliptical for (or, at least, expresses the same proposition at a time *t* as) 'Nixon is now president'" (1981, p. 2). Later in this section it shall be evident that eternalism operates under the same procedure as contextualism, so clarification of the former view will surely facilitate the understanding of the latter. It is interesting, indeed, that (3) and (4) can be considered semantically identical with:

(3') It *now* is Monday

(4') The text was written *this* winter

Temporalism holds that there are at least some sentences that express tenseless propositions, which means that their truth-value can vary over time. Therefore, if a sentence does not contain demonstratives or indexicals, the temporalist would say that

there is a proposition p such that, for any such indexical-free sentences, relative to any time, this kind of sentences expresses p . Thus, sentences like (3) or (4) may change truth value over time: the propositions expressed in (3) is true on Mondays only, and false on other days. Analogously, the proposition expressed in (4) is true in winter only, and false in the rest of the seasons. I would like to observe now that, as I previously noticed, (3) and (4) exhibit a somewhat temporal character. However, eternalist and temporalist analysis can be applied to sentences that may not contain any reference to time at all. Consider the following examples:

(5) Haizea Escribano is thirsty

(6) Haizea Escribano is brown-eyed

I think (5) is could certainly be analyzed according to a both views, eternalist, and temporalist. The former would simply add a time indexical like now and proceed routinely, while the latter will consider (5) to be true only when Haizea Escribano is thirsty. But how could a temporalist analysis apply to (6)? This is a sentences that contains an eternal predicate - eye color does not change with time. I would like to believe that the time parameter in the circumstance becomes unnecessary. But whether the time index ought to be applicable to every proposition along with the possible worlds index is not what I am interested in determining in this paper -although it would make, indeed, an interesting discussion-.

What is now important to keep in mind is that these two theories, namely eternalism and temporalism, correlate with the two semantic approaches to predicates of personal taste, namely contextualism and relativism. Predicates of personal taste are expressions that convey personal preferences in matters such as culinary or aesthetic inclination. A contextualist may analyze this kind of predicates as context-sensitive propositions containing hidden indexicals, or in other words, as tensed propositions. A temporalist will consider these predicates as they come; with no implicit references to hidden indexicals. The meaning of these predicates is to be found at a later stage, when examining the circumstance. Just as a temporalist would examine (3) and (4) as contextually neutral, and proceed to evaluate them according to the indices $i(w, t)$ present in the circumstance, the relativist will add a third parameter -the relevant standard of taste- to the aforementioned indices, so that now $i(w, t, e)$.

3.2 THE RIVALRY BETWEEN CONTEXTUALISM AND RELATIVISM

3.2.1 The concept of faultless disagreement

Before delving into the appropriate theoretical considerations regarding both the contextualist and the relativist stance, I shall examine the notion of faultless disagreement, which both pictures not only presuppose but also aim to preserve with their semantic proposals. In other words, the mission of both contextualism and

relativism is the justification of faultless disagreement, so in a sense it should be considered as their very *raison d'être*. So now we may certainly ask: what is faultless disagreement? Let us start with a precise definition (Kölbel, 2004, p. 54)

A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker *A*, a thinker *B*, and a proposition (content of judgement) *p*, such that: (a) *A* believes (judges) that *p* and *B* believes (judges) that not-*p*, and (b) neither *A* nor *B* has made a mistake (is at fault)

Let us not be bewildered by the formality of this claim, for it stands for a very simple intuition. We find disagreements in everyday situations, and they are of course linguistically expressed. These disagreements can be motivated or faulty, like when my friend believes that the traffic light was green when she drove past it, and I believe the light was not green. This disagreement is not without fault, since we can look at the relevant empirical evidence that has the capacity to dissolve the disagreement -and this is often the case, so that the authorities have proof of her breaking the law-. If my friend and I were to look at the tape where her driving past the street light was recorded, then either of us would have to admit our mistake. Nonetheless, we are interested in faultless disagreements over non-objective matters. Most speakers have a very clear intuition that two people can disagree over a moral maxim, or simply the taste of a certain food; however, none of them is mistaken -although they hold contradictory beliefs-. Let us consider the following sentences, the first uttered by Anna and the second by Barbara:

(7) Pitt is more handsome than Depp

(8) Pitt is not more handsome than Depp

These sentences express the same proposition, but they negate each other; therefore, they are contradictory. If they are contradictory, they should have different truth-values. If this is so, then either Anna or Barbara should be at fault. Nonetheless, many would be inclined to say that it is possible that neither Anna nor Barbara has committed any fault. It is true that Anna can come to believe (8); for instance, if she has forgotten how Depp looks like or has not looked at enough pictures of him. But this would be a case of faulty disagreement, since Anna and Barbara's epistemic standards were not equal -Barbara had the necessary information to make that judgement, while Anna did not-.

3.2.2 The hypothesis of hidden indexicals and the emergence of contextualism

I have already sketched the theory of contextualism in its analogy with the eternalist analysis of tensed propositions. However, we must not forget that the genuine motivation for the emergence of contextualist claims is the preservation of the intuition that in many linguistic occurrences disagreement between two speakers is faultless. In order to have a clearer picture of the semantic premise that contextualism assumes, I think it is appropriate to remember that we have two ways in which the truth-value

assigned to a sentence can be sensitive to contextual factors in a broad sense: the first one is **indexicality**, according to which content varies with context. In the sentence “I am hungry *now*”, the reference of the time indexical must be determined contextually and thus, character seems to be a variable function. The second one is **circumstance sensitivity**, where truth-value varies with the circumstance of evaluation. The sentence “Haizea Escribano is hungry” expresses a tenseless proposition, and thus its content is fixed according to a possible world w and a time t , both parameters pertaining to the circumstance (Kölbel, 2011, p. 128).

Both contextualism and relativism operate under the premise of Kaplan’s two-dimensional semantics, which claims the need of *double-indexing*. This notion assumes both indexicality and circumstance sensitivity, only that it portrays semantic analysis as a two-stage process, where the first step requires to look at indexicality, or in other words, the consideration of the context of use as relevant in its determination of a proposition. The second stage calls for circumstance sensitivity, where the proposition determined at the context of use is now considered in a possible world and assigned a truth-value. On the standard picture, circumstances of evaluation are merely possible worlds. However, some theorists -including Kaplan himself- add further factors to the circumstances, such as time; others even add an agent (Kölbel, 2008, p. 7). Certainly, temporalism presupposes time as a coordinate in the circumstances, and -as we shall see later- semantic relativism depends on the premise that further parameters can be added to discern the meaning of expression containing predicates of personal taste.

Contextualism aims to preserve the notion of faultless disagreement by postulating that sentences expressing matters of taste are assigned a truth-value in the first stage of double indexing, because they are -in an inconspicuous manner- context-sensitive. How can these sentences be context-dependent if they lack indexicals? Well, in the same the tenseless sentence “It is Monday” can be interpreted as containing a hidden indexical, and thus become synonymous with “It is Monday now”. We can all agree that when uttering “Sushi is tasty” -and “is tasty” is considered as the paradigm of a predicate of personal taste- there is nothing resembling an indexical that may account for its context-sensitivity. For the sake of analyzing a case of disagreement, we may as well use this very last sentence as an example:

(9) Sushi is tasty

(10) Sushi is not tasty

Let us suppose that both sentences were uttered. These examples represent one utterance of a sentence s and another utterance of that sentence’s negation not- s . Suppose further that the context in which these two utterances are made are similar in all respects that matter for the assignment of content. As Kölbel concludes, “any world in which the proposition expressed by the first utterance is true is a world in which the

proposition expressed by the second is not true, and vice versa" (2008, p. 11). So if (9) has been uttered in a C_1 and (2) in a C_2 , and (9) and (10) express the same proposition in both contexts, then necessarily there is a faulty disagreement. However, we intuitively would say that the disagreement is faultless: sushi might be tasty and at the same time not tasty, it depends on the culinary preferences of the utterer. The following would be an example of a faulty disagreement which we intuitively would not believe it to be faultless, and it is easy to understand why:

(11) She drove past the green light

(12) She did not drive past the green light

These examples also represent one utterance of a sentence s and another utterance of that sentence's negation $\text{not-}s$. Nonetheless, we can no longer simply assume that the context in which these two utterances are similar in all respects that matter for the assignment of content. This sentence contains an indexical, and that requires the analysis of their character. If (11) was uttered in a C_1 , and in C_1 'she' refers to Anna, and (4) in a C_2 , and in C_2 'she' also refers to Anna, then we can gladly conclude that (3) and (4) express the same proposition in both contexts, and therefore necessarily -and intuitively- there is a faulty disagreement. Supposing that (11) was uttered by Joe and (4) by Jack, then either Joe or Jack have made a mistake. On the contrary, if (11) was uttered in a C_1 , and in C_1 'she' refers to Anna, and (12) in a C_2 , and in C_2 'she' refers to Barbara, then (11) and (12) do not express the same proposition in both contexts. Joe is claiming that Anna drove past the green light, while Jack thinks Barbara did not drive past the green light. Therefore, as the propositions expressed are different, there is no disagreement at all -since both propositions do not contradict each other-. The fact that we can we can semantically determine the referent of the indexical immediately indicates that (11) and (12) can, indeed, express different propositions. This is a standard procedure that cannot be reproduced when there is no indexicals involved. Contextualists must cling to the hypothesis that there are hidden indexicals, so that if -in fact- that is the case, the procedure of determining character can be carried out in a standard way. The following would depict a case of disagreement where the hypothesis of hidden indexicals must be claimed to preserve its faultlessness:

(13) Anna in C_1 : Will Smith is handsome

(14) Barbara in C_2 : Will Smith is not handsome

Most people would be inclined to accept that under certain conditions it is possible that neither Anna nor Barbara has committed any fault. These conditions might include, among others, that (a) both Anna and Barbara believe what they say, (b) that they believe so because they are acquainted with how Will Smith looks like -for if Anna, for instance, associates the name Will Smith with the physical appearance of Samuel L. Jackson, then Anna's epistemic standard is at great disadvantage. Let us suppose, for

the sake of the argument, that these conditions are met. If we want to maintain that neither Anna or Barbara are at fault, then “we must conclude that the contexts C_1 and C_2 are relevantly dissimilar” (Kölbel, 2008, p. 12). The sentence “Will Smith is handsome” must express different propositions in C_1 and C_2 and, if this is the case, then (13) and (14) do not express contradictory propositions, which explains how both utterances can be correct although they syntactically negate each other. It is at this stage when the contextualist turns to the hypothesis of hidden indexicals. And, as we can see, there are no terms in the sentence that can be considered as containing indexicals beneath the surface, contextualism supposes that (13) and (14) are synonymous with:

(13') Anna in C_1 : *On my standard*, Will Smith is handsome

(14') Barbara in C_2 : *On my standard*, Will Smith is not handsome

This is the only way a contextualist can save the intuition that two utterers of a sentence containing a predicate of personal taste are not at fault when they disagree on the truth of their utterance, or when their utterances embody two sentences that syntactically negate each other. However, this procedure has to face a bunch of arguments that challenges its legitimacy.

3.2.3 A host of arguments against contextualism

There are, indeed, several arguments against the contextualist stance reviewed just before, but I shall only look at the most notorious and powerful ones in this section. First, I would like to address **the problem of speech reports** (Kölbel, 2008, p. 13), which draw attention to a remarkable feature of indexicals, which is very much related to their context-sensitive nature: indexical elements must be adjusted when the original sentences containing them are reported. Let us picture the following situation: Natalie Portman plays the main character in the film “Black Swan”, and she then receives an Oscar for her performance. A large part of her script required a series of scenes where very complicated ballet moves were performed by her character. These scenes were shot by a double, Sarah Lane, who is a professional ballerina. When Portman won the Oscar, she failed to mention Sarah Lane in her speech, and Lane sued her because she believed that the failure to mention her in that speech made the audience implicitly believe that Portman was not only a brilliant actress, but also an outstanding ballerina. Portman took the credit of Lane, who had been dancing for over fifteen years and knows that it is impossible that anybody who has not danced ballet intensively for years would not be able to shoot the dancing scenes.

Let us now suppose that Portman issued a press release where she uttered the following sentence: “I admit not shooting the dancing scenes”. This sentence includes the indexical ‘I’, and it should be subjected to an adjustment if somebody were to report what Natalie Portman stated. Suppose that there was indeed such a report by Allison Taylor, who has been investigating the case. Then Taylor would say: “*She* admits not

shooting the dancing scenes". If she were to preserve the original statement by Portman, she would have to say "I admit not shooting the dancing scenes", and the indexical would imply that Taylor herself did not shoot the dancing scenes, which is obvious and irrelevant. It is clear, then, that if an indexical -even a hidden one- were present in a sentence, then the report of that sentence would imply a modification of that indexical. Let us then look at (13) again in a speech report context. If Barbara were to report (13) -uttered by Anna-, she would simply declare "Anna said that Will Smith is handsome". If there was a hidden indexical involved, the sentence would have to be modified accordingly for the report to be syntactically correct, and it seems that this modification is not needed. Therefore, no indexicals are involved in (13). However, I think this objection is somehow weak: the contextualist could reply that the hidden indexical is modified, but that is not easy to perceive at the surface form of the sentence.

The second objection that I want to look at is perhaps more intuitive, or at least less elaborate. The contextualist hypothesis claims that the propositions expressed by sentences such as (13) and (14) respectively "are not contradictory; therefore, they could both be true at once" (Kölbel, 2008, p. 15). As a consequence, contextualism predicts that Barbara could come to accept that Will Smith is handsome, or that Anna could believe that Will Smith is not, both **without changing their mind**. Therefore, Barbara should be able to assert the following: "I believe that Will Smith is not handsome" and at the same time accept that he is. However, this is clearly impossible. Impossibility to assert such a thing comes of course as a consequence of the contextualist's conclusion that (13') and (14') are synonymous. For if they were not, Barbara would make perfect sense by stating "On my standard, Will Smith is not handsome and, in Anna's standard, Will Smith is handsome". Although contextualists might still have a chance to answer to this objection (see Kölbel, 2008, p. 15-16), they are now walking on thin ice.

There is a third objection that Kölbel (2008) does not consider, and I think it is the most intuitive of all: if the propositions expressed by two mutually negated sentences such as (13) and (14) are, in fact, different propositions, then in what sense is there a disagreement at all? It is a necessary that, for a disagreement to take place, two people have to utter two sentences that contradict each other. If they simply utter different sentences, then not only is there not a disagreement, but -necessarily- there is no faultlessness at all. Since contextualism fails to capture the intuition of faultless disagreements, and, as I have previously stated, its very *raison d'être* relies on this preservation, then it should automatically be discarded.

3.2.4 Motivations for semantic relativism

It has now become sufficiently clear that contextualists about taste -may this be aesthetic or merely culinary- will view expressions regarding taste likewise as indexical expressions but -as we have seen- with some difficulty explaining the apparent genuine

disagreement in these areas of discourse. It is distressingly problematic that analogous complications arise when extending contextualist claims to moral judgements, whose semantic analysis I aim to tackle in the next section of this paper. In this section I intend to evaluate what is often addressed to as New Relativism, a recent version of relativism that attempts to achieve an explanation of faultless disagreement in predicates of personal taste *via* a much less familiar form of context dependence (Baghramian and Carter, 2017). Contextualism assumes that utterances such as (5) and (6) are both correct due to their implicit context dependence. However, as Kölbel puts it, “one way to avoid that conclusion would be to oppose to this very assumption” (2008, p. 16). There are various ways to formulate the main premise of New Relativism and I shall now allude to two of them, both of which have been devised by the two leading proponents of semantic relativism. Let us begin with Kölbel’s formulation (2008, p. 17):

Instead of saying that the semantic content of the sentences in question varies with the context of use, the [relativist] proposal is to say that while the content remains stable the content’s truth-value varies not just with a possible world but also with an additional factor [...] So the semantics still defines a three-place sentential truth-predicate $T(s, c, e)$ but now the third relatum of the truth-relation is a complex circumstance of evaluation e , consisting of a possible world w and a standard of taste.

Although I have presented the discussion between contextualism and relativism primarily in line with Kölbel’s approach, I believe I could not leave out MacFarlane’s stance in this matter. They almost exclusively differ terminologically, since they are both advocates of New Relativism, but I think the latter deserves at least a humble reference due to his major contributions to its development. It should be noticed that his approach focuses solely on matters of culinary taste, and specifically in the analysis of the predicate “is tasty” (MacFarlane, 2014, p. 23)

Thus, by relaxing our tacit assumption that occurrences of “tasty” have their extensions determined by facts about the contexts in which they are used, and letting them depend also on the context in which they are assessed, we can give an account of “tasty” as an *assessment-sensitive* predicate.

These quotes are mere approximations to the concept of semantic relativism, but they clearly state their main premise: the truth-value of predicates of personal taste should be evaluated in the circumstance, or as MacFarlane puts it, in the *context of assessment*. Now, what is exactly a standard of taste? It can semantically be defined in very simple terms: it is simply a function from pairs of propositions and possible worlds to truth-values. If this function serves its purpose, then it is surely advantageous to shift the weight of truth from context to circumstances of evaluation: it avoids the objections that affect the contextualist stance, while still preserving the basic intuition regarding faultlessness in disagreement about taste. However, we might as well ask: is it legitimate to add an extra parameter to the circumstance that evaluates the standard of taste relevant to the context? My answer would be conditional. If we consider theories such

as temporalism as legitimate, then the relativist framework is indeed valid. If we find unproblematic to accept a circumstance of the form CE (w, t) then, from a logical perspective, a circumstance such that CE (w, e) should be likewise tolerated. Let us now evaluate the following pair of sentences from the relativist perspective:

(15) Anna in C_1 : Pretzels are tasty

(16) Barbara in C_2 : Pretzels are not tasty

While the contextualists would claim that (15) and (16) express different propositions and that is precisely the reason why no utterer is at fault when expressing them, the relativists believe there is a single truth-evaluable proposition which Anna affirms and Barbara denies. In the case where Anna says "Pretzels are tasty", and Barbara denies this, there is a uniform content that is affirmed by Anna's utterance and denied by Barbara's, namely *the* proposition that pretzels are tasty. So we have a genuine disagreement. The new relativist will add that the disagreement is *faultless* because the proposition affirmed in *A's* utterance has a truth value only relative to a *standards* parameter: Anna's standards, when Anna is the assessor, and Barbara's standards, when Barbara is the assessor. Therefore, the new relativist claims to be able to preserve *both* the apparent subjectivity of taste discourse *and* -unlike the contextualist- our intuition that pairs of negated sentences like (15) and (16) constitute faultless disagreements (Baghramian and Carter, 2017)

4. A CRITICAL SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS: Is semantic relativism qualified to dive into the intricacies of morality?

In the previous section I have examined semantic relativism only to conclude that it provides a potent framework that escapes the inconveniences of the contextualist approach to predicates personal of taste, whose hypothesis of hidden indexicals presents considerable difficulties. Though it accounts rather effectively for faultless disagreement in matters of taste, we must now evaluate relativism in its aptness to deal with disagreement in the moral sphere. In this pursuit I deem adequate to sketch the premises of two metaethical frameworks, relativism and realism, to delve into the moral implications that semantic relativism is burdened with. I will consider metaethical moral relativism and semantic relativism as correlates insofar as they, as a fact, share the same metaphysical premises. In the same way, I will take metaethical moral realism and semantic realism as correlates since they also share the same core presuppositions. The idea of reviewing moral realism seems fortunate to me since it will provide a set of metaphysical premises that categorically oppose to those carried by relativism, which gives me the opportunity not only to assess its efficiency in accounting for moral predicates, but also to draft a critical analysis of its fundamental values. I intend to divide

this section into two parts: the first one will present the two metaethical frameworks along with their respective semantic correlates; the second one aims to provide specific cases of moral disagreements that will be analyzed according to the contextualist, realist and relativist semantic proposals.

4.1 METAETHICAL FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR SEMANTIC CORRELATES

4.1.1. Moral realism

Moral realism is the metaethical counterpart of moral relativism, and advocates the idea that moral truth cannot be relativized; it has an absolute nature. It is a plausible intuition for most people -including me-; however, it staggers significantly when we look at empirical evidence of the wide diversity of moral principles defended in different cultures. This evidence, of course, only would lead the realist to argue that the fact that we have a very wide array of moral codes does not mean that they are all good. However, if he wants to claim that only one or some of them are correct, then he should have a clear methodological strategy to elucidate which one or ones this or these are. A rather standard definition of moral realism is adduced by Hills, who argues it is the theory “that moral propositions, like ‘killing the innocent is wrong’ are truth-evaluable and that some of them are true” and specifically remarks that “their truth does not depend on the society or culture in which we live: they are not merely true relative to a moral perspective or moral standpoint. They are objectively true” (2013, p. 411) Or, in other words, moral judgements are true or false simpliciter, not relative to a particular moral code. The claim that moral truths are absolute truths is problematic when explaining disagreement - in principle, a realist treatment of moral predicates seems to necessarily yield faulty disagreements. However, Hills might be able to object to this.

An important distinction is crucial when evaluating the capacity of realism to account for moral disagreements. A traditional, not nuanced realist view of morals would subscribe to what we can call **strong realism**, which cannot account for faultless disagreement and is therefore obliged to find a reason for the overwhelming failure to agree in moral claims. Hills, however, considering the efficiency of relativist semantics in explaining disagreements, resolves to reconcile moral realism with the possibility of faultless disagreement by assuming the hypothesis that there is a certain epistemic norm that takes part in the process of evaluating the truth of moral predicates. Let us call this view **moderate realism**, for it opens up to the possibility of disagreements without fault in the moral sphere while still adhering to a realist picture. In the moderate realist’s view, the moral realist can accommodate faultless disagreement in the following sense: “while it must be true of A and B that at least one of them has a false belief, it may also be true that neither of them is at fault in the way that they formed the belief, for they perfectly followed an appropriate epistemic norm of following one’s

conscience" (Hills, 2013, p. 418). Whether this epistemic norm is valid or not, we shall investigate in relation to specific instances of moral disagreements.

4.1.2. Moral relativism

Relativism has proven to be very successful in the semantic analysis of a number of non-objective predicates. However, moral matters are to be address in a much more tactful manner, for obvious reasons. Therefore, a closer look into its **metaethical implications** seems like a prudent move to me. I will now adduce a very broad -though consistent- definition of metaethical moral relativism that will surely be controversial enough to fuel discussion: The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons (Gowans, 2018). Most people -including myself- would not easily subscribe to these statements. If we endorse the idea that there are not at least some universal maxims according to which some deeds can be considered wrong in an absolute way, then we are tacitly giving consent to horrendous practices. Thus, relativism might be innocuous in the semantic analysis of matters of taste; nonetheless, I would like to reconsider it as a possible framework to tackle moral judgements in accordance with Kölbel's approach (2005), which I will later examine.

Moral relativism has two **semantic counterparts**, to which the previous section has been dedicated: contextualism and relativism. Although these only differ in their way of treating non-objective predicates, they might as well be reconsidered individually in order to study their implications in the moral sphere:

(A) A contextualist approach to moral predicates

Contextualism has certainly been historically seen as a valid framework to accommodate moral claims, although its legitimacy is now very much at stake due to its -already proven- incompetence to tackle predicates of taste. However, a brief overview of a contextualist approach to moral matters is certainly intriguing. This view has been traditionally associated to Harman's reflections on the nature of morality (1975, p. 43):

Moral judgments – or, rather, an important class of them – make sense only in relation to and with reference to one or another agreement or understanding [...] The thesis that morality derives from implicit agreements and that moral judgments are in a logical sense made in relation to such agreements helps to explain the otherwise puzzling aspects of our own moral views.

Harman insists in the idea that there are no universal truths, only agreements reached within the context of different communities. These agreements are motivated by desires and interests of the members of the specific community; as Harman assumes

“that the possession of rationality is not sufficient to provide a source for relevant reasons” (1975, p. 38). This is, of course, a blatant negation of the realist premise that there are universal moral truths which we would grasp by rational analysis. Harman’s logical formulation of moral relativism reads as follows: “if *S* says that (morally) *A* ought to do *D*, there are certain motivational attitudes *M*, which *S* assumes are shared by *S*, *A*, and *S*’s audience” (Harman, 1975, p. 38), *S* being the moral judge and *S*’s audience the people who fit in the community in which certain moral principles are defended. What Harman failed to realize is that this kind of the contextual treatment of moral claims is semantically problematic, let alone the fact that it bears condemnable consequences in morals. Although in his article “Moral Relativism Defended” there is no concrete evidence that Harman’s defense of moral relativism presupposes any semantic thesis - neither contextualist nor relativist-, Kölbel insists that “Harman’s moral relativism entails a thesis of hidden indexicality” (2008, p. 26).

(B) *A relativist approach to moral predicates*

Kölbel (2005) claims to be able to extend semantic relativism to moral claims, but at the same time shows to be aware of the delicate nature of this procedure. However, his relativist stance on the matter is firm, as he tacitly objects to moral realism by asserting that, within a moral community, the treatment of moral judgements as objective would lead to “a certain methodological uniformity amongst users of moral concepts. But no such methodological uniformity will emerge beyond the boundaries of that moral community” (2005, p. 66). He thus concludes that faultless disagreements on moral issues are possible, or in other words, they are non-objective. However, objectivity in moral judgements is examined in greater detail:

Consider the disagreement between the Greek who says burying your dead relatives is not wrong (in fact: required) and the Indian who says that burying your dead relatives is wrong. If we suppose *wrongness is maximally objective*, then it follows that one of them has made a mistake. This, I believe, is an absurd conclusion. [...] If we are prepared to concede that two different communities can nevertheless both be employing the concept of wrongness, then we should also conclude that wrongness is not maximally objective.

What Kölbel means by the expression “non-maximally objective” is that there are plausible cases of faultless disagreements. He thus saves moral relativism by admitting that there the concept of wrongness is not objective according to the absolutist standards of the realism. As Kölbel puts it, “a maximally objective proposition will be one on which there cannot be faultless disagreement among any pair of thinkers” (2005, p. 67) and it is only here that we find faulty disagreements. In his words, “moral judgements are objective in a certain moral community of people who share a set of principles. Moral judgements are non-objective when extended to the general community of speakers, within which several minor moral communities exist” (2005, p.

70). This, I believe, is a very astute move. However, we shall analyze it in further detail with specific examples of disagreements in the remainder of this paper.

4.2 EXAMPLES OF MORAL DISAGREEMENTS

4.2.1 Instances of moral disagreement in a contextualist framework

Harman insists in the idea that there are no universal truths, only agreements among individuals reached within the context of different communities. This means that moral principles are agreed upon contextually, which I think is indicative of an implicit thesis of hidden indexicality -and so does Kölbel (2008, p. 25). Moral disagreements will be reflected in pairs of sentences like these:

- (1) Torture is wrong
- (2) Torture is not wrong

Where (1) and (2) are respectively synonymous with the following:

- (1') Anna says: On my standard, torture is wrong
- (2') Barbara says: On my standard, torture is not wrong

The analysis of (1)-(2) proposed in (1')-(2') is indeed problematic, since it implies that the two negated statements are not contradictory - they simply express different propositions. If (1') and (2') express different propositions, then both can be true at the same time, which yielded an unwanted outcome in the case of predicates of personal taste -as we have already seen-. Furthermore, we have to consider the argument that, if (1) and (2) express different propositions -which they do-, then in which sense can they disagree with one another? If we consider both (i) the conclusion of impossibility of faultless disagreement *and* (ii) the fact that the negated sentences can be true at the same time -which is the reason why we infer (i)-, then I believe we have very good reasons to discard the contextualist stance. But I believe that it is (ii) that bears condemnable consequences in the moral sphere: most of us are not willing to assume statements such as (2), let alone believe that its negated version is also acceptable simultaneously. This not only bewilder us insofar as we are unwilling to assume that two contradictory moral statements can be true at once, but also -and especially- horrify as because it might entail indefinite moral permissiveness.

4.2.2. Instances of moral disagreement in a relativist framework

As we have seen, Kölbel defends moral relativism upon the premise that the concept of wrongness is not objective according to the absolutist standards of the realism. Maximal objectivity only occurs within a group of people that share the same

moral standards, and it is here that we find faulty disagreements. But if the moral standards of two groups of people that do not share the same core values, then disagreement has to be without fault. Let us translate this to semantic language:

(3) Anna says: Eating meat is wrong

(4) Barbara says: Eating meat is not wrong

Suppose that a certain set of moral principles P is shared within a family F , and suppose further that both Anna and Barbara belong to the same family. F is a vegetarian family, and therefore P implies the disapproval of eating meat. According to Kölbel, these moral judgements are maximally objective, since they occur within a group of people that share the same moral values; therefore, either Anna or Barbara must be at fault. Unlike the contextualist view, relativism allows disagreements in mutually negated sentences because they express the same proposition, and they do so because their truth-value is assessed in the circumstance of evaluation. The function of character in both sentences will be a constant one, since relativism refuses to posit hidden indexicals. As the function of content is variable, an analysis of the circumstance must be carried out, which will require an evaluation of (3) and (4) according to a possible world and a moral standard. Then, if we take S_F to be the standard of moral assessment by which we will evaluate (3) and (4), then the circumstance will look like $CE(W, S_F)$. As S_F evaluates both (3) and (4), *and* it is the case that both happen to share this standard, then the disagreement between Anna and Barbara is faulty -and it is Barbara who is at fault-. Now consider the following case:

(3) Anna says: Eating meat is wrong

(5) Joe says: Eating meat is not wrong

Suppose Joe is not a member of the family F , a vegetarian family. In Joe's family, eating meat is permissible and morally correct. According to Kölbel, these moral judgements are not maximally objective, since they occur between two people that belong to two different groups that do not share core moral principles; specifically, Joe's group does not share P . therefore, neither Anna nor Joe are at fault. We still take (3) and (5) to express the same proposition, but we will evaluate their content according to $CE(W, S_F)$. Disagreement can be faulty or faultless depending on the standard that we have chosen in the circumstance of evaluation; in this case, we have chosen Anna and Barbara's moral standard. I would say that, in this case, the disagreement is faultless, because the contradictory statements have been made within different communities, which allows Joe to have a different standard than S_F .

4.2.3. Instances of moral disagreement in a realist framework

According to moral realism, moral propositions, like ‘killing the innocent is wrong’ are truth-evaluable and that some of them are true. Furthermore, their truth does not depend on the society or culture in which we live: they are objective -or as Kölbel would say, maximally objective-. As we have seen, from the perspective of strong realism two contradictory statements about a moral issue yield a faulty disagreement. But let us see what would a moderate realist say about the next pair of sentences:

(6) Anna says: Torture is wrong

(7) Barbara says: Torture is not wrong

A moderate realist like Hills would accept the premise of an epistemic norm for morality that makes room for the possibility of faultless disagreement. This epistemic norm can be “following your conscience”. But what does it mean to follow one’s conscience in moral judgment? And is it legitimate to conclude that there is room for faultless disagreement iff such a norm is applied? According to Hills’ views, Anna and Barbara disagree about one of these objective, determinate moral truths; at most one of them can have a true belief. But they both have arrived at their own moral judgement by following their conscience. In other words, they did as well as they could. Each of Anna and Barbara can think of the other: I disagree with her, but she is not at fault *in the way he formed his belief*, because he did so by following his conscience. Following one’s conscience implies being a morally ideal agent: “they will not simply do the right action. Rather, in doing so, they will respond to the reasons why it is right, the morally relevant features of the situation, by making their own judgement of what to do and acting on that basis” (Hills, 2013, p. 423). I believe that Hills is trying to favor the epistemic state of **moral meditation** -which involves an individual process of thorough moral reasoning- over the epistemic state of being in **possession of moral truth**. Moral meditation is, indeed, a crucial part of reaching moral truth; however, would a true moral realist favor individual, possibly false ponderations over moral truth? This is what is at stake, and the possibility of faultless disagreement in a realist framework firmly depends on the answer to this question.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have first reviewed the antecedents of semantic relativism, in order to understand how the Kaplanian concepts of context and circumstance of evaluation were of paramount importance in the semantic treatment of non-objective predicates. Secondly, I have sketched the two main semantic positions proposed to explain faultless disagreement in predicates of personal taste: contextualism and relativism. Since the former could barely sustain the idea that there are disagreements

at all -due to its evaluation of pairs of negated sentences about taste as different, non-contradictory propositions-, I have favored the latter as the most efficient alternative to tackle judgements of taste. The ultimate goal of this analysis was, however, to ponder the capacity of the relativist framework in accounting for a specific kind of non-objective claims: those attaining moral matters. In the last section, I have first studied the metaethical presuppositions of moral relativism, insofar as the semantic approach to relativism about morals had to work under some of these assumptions. Secondly, I have considered moral realism as a means to contrast the metaethical implications of relativism and, surprisingly, I have found that a semantic account of moral claims allegedly could at the same time (a) preserve the intuition of faultless disagreement and (b) defend a concept of non-relativized moral truth.

We are now confronted with a dilemma: should we choose to follow Hills (2013), and endorse the view that there is, in fact, room for preserving faultless disagreement within a realist framework, or should we regard the semantic efficiency of relativism to account for disagreements where no one is at fault as a better alternative to account for disagreement in moral matters? I want to conclude that, although I consider moral realism as metaethically preferable, I think that Hills' semantic proposal lacks the appropriate semantic accuracy to reconcile the plausible realist intuition that there are universal moral truths with the claim faultless disagreement is possible within a realist framework. The fact that we can faultlessly disagree on the epistemic norm of following one's conscience shows that faultless disagreement occurs at a pre-epistemic, psychological level: we cannot blame our epistemic pair, who negates our -allegedly true- moral claim in the way he formed his belief. He was right in that he took the time to ponder his arguments, and surely had reasons to claim what he claimed. However, at a purely epistemic level, he has made a mistake -since a true moral claim and its negated counterpart cannot be true at the same time-. The sheer foundational principle of faultless disagreement has been therefore violated, for disagreement over non-objective claims can only be faultless if we take the two negated claims to be the product of different standards -in this case, different moral standards-.

Kölbel's account of faultless disagreement in the moral sphere seems much more plausible to me. It works smoothly on a semantic level by relativizing truth according to different moral standards in the circumstance of evaluation. It is true that the metaethical presuppositions of relativism are indeed controversial, but I think there is plenty of nuances that could attenuate its initial rawness. Let us simply revise the aforementioned definition of moral relativism (Gowans, 2018) "the truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons". Prima facie we would be inclined to think that there is no moral truth at all - at least I am inclined to think that truth ought to be universal in them moral sphere, otherwise many atrocities could be

perfectly justified. However, moral relativism merely states the fact that truth is relative to a certain moral code, and there is no reason why a relativist is banned from forming an opinion on which moral codes are good and which are not. Imagine these were aesthetic standards: according to a community *A*, blond hair is prettier than black hair; according to another community, *B*, black hair is prettier. The relativist is not theoretically bound to say: I believe that both black and blonde hair are beautiful. He is perfectly entitled to admit that, although according to *A* black hair is not pretty, I like black hair and I do not like blond. In short, we should not disdain moral relativism without regarding it as nuanced.

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