

# A CRITERION FOR OBJECTIVITY -

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BIBLID [0495-4548 (2000) 15: 38; p. 209-228]

ABSTRACT: There are many reasons to assume that the contents expressible by declarative sentences are generally truth-evaluable (reasons stemming from semantics, logic and considerations about truth). This assumption of global truth-evaluability, however, appears to conflict with the view that the contents of some sentences do not admit of truth or falsehood for lack of objectivity of their subject matter. Could there be a notion of truth on which the truth-evaluability of a content does not rule out the non-objectivity of its subject matter?

In this paper, I discuss Crispin Wright's criterion of Cognitive Command as a criterion for objectivity. This criterion faces the Problem of A Priori Error. I reject Wright's response to that problem and propose to solve the problem by relativising truth. This move allows for the possibility of contents that are truth-evaluable yet non-objective.

Keywords: objectivity, truth, relativism, C. Wright, Cognitive Command.

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### *1. Excess Objectivity*

It would be very convenient, if we could assume that the contents of utterances of sentences are generally truth-evaluable. Such an assumption of global truth-evaluability would be convenient for several reasons. First, the dominant approach in philosophical as well as linguistic semantics presupposes it. The core and strength of truth conditional semantics lies in its treatment of the compositionality of meaning, i.e. of the fact that the meaning of a complex expression depends on, and is determined by, the

meaning of its constituent parts, and the way these parts are put together. Because the truth conditional semanticist assumes that the central element of the meaning of each sentence is its truth conditional content, he can exploit Tarski's recursive technique for stating in a precise way how the meaning of sentences depends on their parts. The assumption that the central semantic feature of a sentence is its truth conditional content is therefore the key to the success of truth conditional semantics.

Secondly and relatedly, standard logic employs a notion of validity which presupposes that the premisses and conclusions of valid arguments are truth-evaluable. Thus, if we wished to restrict the range of sentences whose contents are evaluable in terms of truth, we would thereby also restrict the range of sentences to which our standard logic applies. The assumption of global truth-evaluability is therefore convenient from the point of view of the range of applicability of logic.

Thirdly, we do in fact attribute truth to contents of any sort and we do so for a very good reason. We often need to attribute truth in order to endorse contents we cannot explicitly assert.<sup>1</sup> I might, for example, need to say that some of the things Wolfgang says are true. This need might arise whatever the subject matter of those of Wolfgang's enunciations that I have in mind. The usefulness of referring to the content of what someone says and then calling it true is independent of the subject matter of that content. Suppose that, say, contents concerning matters of taste were not capable of being true or false. Then I could not, for example, say that all Wolfgang says on matters of taste is true. I would have to look for different ways of expressing my agreement with Wolfgang. Thus, a denial of the assumption of global truth evaluability deprives us of an important linguistic tool.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its convenience, however, the assumption of global truth evaluability is contentious. Three concrete example sentences may serve to illustrate why:

- (1) Licorice is tasty.
- (2) The Popocatepetl will probably erupt within ten years.
- (3) Cheating on one's spouse is bad.

These three assertoric sentences have, respectively, the content that licorice is tasty, the content that the Popocatepetl will probably erupt within ten years and the content that cheating on one's spouse is bad. According to the assumption in question, all three are truth-evaluable. This is controversial, because, roughly, it bestows too much objectivity on moral, probabilistic

and aesthetic<sup>3</sup> questions. Only a moral, aesthetic and probabilistic objectivist, it seems, can accept the assumption of global truth-evaluability.

Arguably, not all natural language sentences concern objective questions. Many philosophers, and indeed non-philosophers, would deny that it is an objective matter whether a work of art is beautiful. Many would deny that it is an objective matter whether a stew is tasty. Still many, though fewer, would deny that it is an objective matter whether an act is morally bad. Again, some people would deny that there are objective probabilities. Nevertheless it can be the content of utterances that something is probable, bad or tasty. Does it follow that all these people have to abjure truth conditional semantics? Does it follow that they must all restrict the range of applicability of logic? Do they have to stop calling certain contents true? The aim of this paper is to outline how the assumption of global truth evaluability *can* be made compatible with the view that not everything is objective.

But what is meant by "objective" and why does truth evaluability seem to entail objectivity? One line of thought is the following. Truth is objective, because to be true is to describe reality correctly, to state how the world really is. But values and probabilities aren't part of reality, there are no evaluative or probabilistic facts. So whether something has a certain value or probability is not an objective matter. If someone says that something is valuable or probable, he is therefore not aiming at truth, not trying to describe or represent reality. The content of what he says is not evaluable in terms of truth. So global truth evaluability is false, at least in so far as those sentences are concerned whose content it is that something has or lacks value, or that something is probable or improbable.

Who is to say whether there are facts of a certain kind, or what sorts of aspects of reality are there to be described? Are we to trust our intuitions? I believe that we must not uncritically follow intuitions about the nature of reality and about what facts there are, if this leads us to dismiss truth conditional semantics, to restrict the applicability of logic, and to revise our ordinary practice of attributing truth.<sup>4</sup> So, before drawing radical conclusions, we must consider carefully how the difficulty might be circumvented. I shall briefly review three different options.

## 2. *Three Ways*

Let us call the general problem I have identified the "problem of excess objectivity". Then the conjunction of the following three claims can be

made responsible for the problem of excess objectivity in the case of sentence (1):

- (a) (1)'s content is completely described as the content that licorice is tasty.
- (b) All contents are truth-evaluable
- (c) (For any  $p$ ) if the content that  $p$  is truth evaluable, then it is an objective matter whether  $p$ .

As it follows from (a)-(c) that it is an objective matter whether licorice is tasty, we need to deny at least one of (a)-(c), if we want to be able to reject objectivism in aesthetics. The situation will be similar with (2), (3) and other problematic sentences. So presumably there are generally three strategies for solving the problem, namely those corresponding to the denial, respectively, of (a), of (b) and of (c).

I shall not in this paper discuss the first two options of denying (a) or denying (b). I believe that neither of them is recommendable, but for reasons of space, I cannot argue this here.<sup>5</sup> This leaves us with the possibility of denying (c): even though it may be true or false that licorice is tasty, it nevertheless is not an objective matter. But how could it be true that licorice is tasty, or that it is not tasty, without it being an objective matter? We first need to know more about the apparent connection between truth and objectivity.

### 3. Wright's Criterion of Cognitive Command

Why should truth-evaluability automatically lead to objectivity? -Some say it need not. The so-called minimalists about truth propose a notion of truth that is metaphysically non-committal, and thus frees us from unwanted objectivistic consequences of the assumption that all contents are truth-evaluable. Crispin Wright is one proponent of this view.

Wright's project in his book *Truth and Objectivity* is to develop a new framework for "realist/antirealist debates". For Wright, a realist about a given subject is someone who believes that our judgements or statements on that subject represent, and answer to, the external world "as independently of the beliefs about it which we do, will, or ever would form" (p. 2) and that we are, under favourable circumstances, capable of making judgements (statements) on this subject that represent the world *correctly*, i.e. are true. Wright recognises that there are many subject areas where realism is legitimately controversial, notably the area of judgements (statements) that

concern whether something is funny. Other examples are moral, aesthetic and modal discourse. He is dissatisfied with the fact that discussions of realism have often taken the form of debates whether judgements of a certain sort are candidates for truth, and whether sentences that serve to express such judgements count as assertoric. He therefore calls for a new framework for discussing realism (§1.II).

Within this new framework, realists and anti-realists (in Wright's above explained sense) should be able to discuss their concerns in terms other than those of truth-aptness or assertoricity. He therefore proposes

a conception of assertoric content which views it as something ensured by a discourse's satisfying constraints of internal discipline and surface syntax. (...) Any of the areas of discourse which historically has provoked, or is likely to provoke, a realist/anti-realist debate is also likely to satisfy these constraints. And assertoric content, so ensured, suffices for the definability upon the discourse of a predicate which, by dint of its satisfaction of certain basic platitudes, qualifies (...) as a truth predicate. (p. 140)

These platitudes include the thesis that to assert is to present as true, the disquotational principle (that any sentence " $p$ " is true just if  $p$ ) and the thesis that every assertoric content has a negation which is also an assertoric content (see e.g. p. 34 and 72). Truth, on this view, is "not intrinsically a metaphysically heavyweight notion" (p. 72) and thus permits that even anti-realists concede the truth aptness of all superficially assertoric sentences.

But what about all the perceived contrasts between those subject areas that are objective, where we represent an objective reality, and those that are not objective, where an anti-realist attitude is appropriate? If the difference is not to do with truth evaluability or assertoricity, what does it consist in?<sup>6</sup> Wright provides several criteria for classifying discourses as more or less realist, criteria which are supposed to be independent of truth evaluability. One of them, the criterion of "Cognitive Command" exploits the idea that some areas of discourse are properly representational while others aren't. This criterion is particularly interesting for our purposes of characterising objectivity.<sup>7</sup> A discourse exerts Cognitive Command, Wright says, if and only if

It is a priori that differences of opinion formulated within the discourse, unless excusable as a result of vagueness in a disputed statement, or in the standards of acceptability, or variation in personal evidence thresholds, so to speak, will involve something that may properly be regarded as a cognitive shortcoming. (p. 144)

In the background is a comparison with representational devices, devices whose function is the production of representations, such as a camera or fax

machine. If such devices diverge in the representations they produce, then that must be due either to malfunction or difference in input. Similarly, if a discourse is in a strong realist sense representational, i.e. if the judgements and statements that are part of it function to represent independent reality, then any divergence in judgement between two believers must be due to a difference in input or malfunction: at least one of the two must have insufficient or misleading evidence, or have made a mistake in processing the evidence he has, in short: at least one is guilty of cognitive failure. The qualifications about vagueness and differences in personal evidence thresholds serve to accommodate obvious special cases of disagreement.

I believe that this criterion captures an important aspect of the ordinary concept of objectivity.<sup>8</sup> If two thinkers disagree on an objective matter then that shows that one of them has made a mistake. Presumably it is an objective matter whether I have switched off the lights in the living room: if I believe I have switched them off and you think I haven't, one of us has committed a mistake somewhere. We cannot both be right. Presumably it is not an objective matter whether licorice is tasty: if I believe that licorice is tasty and you believe that it is not, then that does not yet show that one of us has made a mistake. It is possible that none of us has made a mistake. But if it were an objective matter whether licorice is tasty (as some would argue), then our disagreement would surely show that one of us is making a mistake. The criterion fits very well with an ordinary understanding of objectivity, and I believe that either side of a given dispute about whether some topic is objective can agree on a criterion of this sort.<sup>9</sup>

Two features of Wright's criterion require brief comment at this point. First, Wright's formulation makes use of the notion of the *a priori*. A discourse exerts Cognitive Command just if *it is a priori* that disagreements within it involve cognitive shortcoming. I take Wright to be expressing a fairly obvious point: if a discourse is objective, we know that disagreements involve cognitive failure *without any further investigation about the particular circumstances of the disagreement, or about the disputants in question*. In other words, the information which discourse it is (e.g. discourse about whether the lights have been switched off) and that there is disagreement already suffices for knowledge that cognitive shortcoming is involved. If finding out that a cognitive mistake has been made requires further information on the particular disagreements in question, then the discourse is not objective. In particular, if further investigation were to reveal that, as a matter of empirical fact, disagreement in a given discourse is always down to cognitive failure, then that alone would not be sufficient

for Cognitive Command. In §6 below I shall say more about the source of this apriority.

Secondly, Wright's criterion is a criterion for the objectivity of a *discourse*, not of individual questions. Intuitively, this makes a lot of sense. Objectivity is a matter of the *topic* concerned, and presumably discourses are in part individuated by topic. On the other hand, the Cognitive Command criterion provides also a criterion for the individuation of discourses. A range of contents does not qualify as a discourse, if its fulfilment of, or failure to fulfil, the Cognitive Command criterion is not uniform. In the following discussion I shall not dwell upon the issue of the individuation of discourses. I shall often speak of Cognitive Command as a criterion for the objectivity of a single question (i.e. the limiting case of a discourse: one which consists only of a content and its negation).

I have, so far, signalled sympathy with Wright's approach, and in particular with his criterion of Cognitive Command as a criterion for objectivity. Acceptance of the criterion, however, leads into a profound difficulty. As I shall now show, it seems as if extremely minimal assumptions about truth will ensure that any truth-apt discourse will exert Cognitive Command. If this were correct, the whole strategy of providing a metaphysically neutral notion of truth, which allows truth evaluability not to entail objectivity, would fail. It is in the response to this difficulty where I part company with Wright.

#### 4. *The Problem of A Priori Error*

Minimalists about truth, like Wright, subscribe to the view that every substitution instance of the schema "It is true that  $p$  if and only if  $p$ " is true. Let us follow Wright in calling this schema the "equivalence schema" and formalize it as follows:

$$(ES) \quad T(p) + p$$

If any instance of (ES) is correct then so is any instance of the following two schemata:

$$(ES^*) \quad \text{not-}T(p) + \text{not-}p$$

$$(ES^{**}) \quad T(\text{not-}p) + \text{not-}p$$

(ES\*) is the result of negating both sides of (ES), and (ES\*\*) is a special case of (ES). By transitivity it follows that instances of the following schema (Negation Equivalence) are also correct:

$$(EN) \quad \text{not-T}(p) + \text{T}(\text{not-}p)^{10}$$

Finally, negating either side of (NE) yields

$$(NE^*) \quad \text{not-not-T}(p) + \text{not-T}(\text{not-}p)$$

This little derivation shows that any disagreement in any discourse that is truth-apt will involve a mistake, namely the mistake of believing something not true. For consider any disagreement: one thinker, *A*, believes that *p*, another thinker, *B*, believes that *not-p*. Now suppose that *B*'s belief is true. Then according to (NE) *A*'s belief is not true. But if it's not the case that *A*'s belief is not true, then, according to (NE\*\*), *B*'s belief is not true. Thus either way, one of the two believes something that is not true.

Within any discourse that admits a truth predicate, it is a priori that disagreement involves error, namely the plain error of believing something not true. Does this show that all truth-apt discourses also exert Cognitive Command? Not quite: strictly speaking, Wright's notion of Cognitive Command requires that the involvement of *cognitive shortcoming* be a priori guaranteed for any disagreements within the discourse in question. Thus, if belief in something not true were to constitute a cognitive shortcoming, then Cognitive Command would be exerted by every truth-apt discourse. In other words, the criterion would be trivially fulfilled, and thus be useless as a crucial mark of realism or objectivity.<sup>11</sup>

##### 5. Does plain error amount to cognitive failure?

Wright's response is to deny that belief in something not true amounts to cognitive shortcoming (pp. 148-57). This, of course, raises the question what exactly cognitive shortcoming is. Truth, as Wright himself takes great care to argue (pp. 15-18), is a norm. If we take this norm to demand that one believe only what is true, then belief in something not true must amount to shortcoming of *some* kind. Why not a cognitive kind? Is truth not a cognitive norm? It would seem that Wright owes an account of the notion of cognitive shortcoming which shows that mere failure to comply with the truth norm does not yet amount to cognitive failure. Wright however turns the tables. He claims that it is those who want to claim that mere



violation of the truth norm qualifies as cognitive shortcoming who owe a proof (p. 149). Taking discourse about what is funny as an example, he argues that it would be extremely difficult to defend the view that disagreements within this discourse must involve cognitive failure on the part of one of the disputants. Such a defense, he suggests, would need to invoke "the idea of a *sui generis cognitive* sense or faculty of comedy, sensitive to *sui generis* states of affairs" (p. 150). But such an idea would presumably be very difficult to sustain.

I do not wish to decide the issue of which side owes a proof here. But I do want to argue that Wright's interpretation of the notion of cognitive failure throws doubt on the usefulness of Cognitive Command as a criterion for objectivity. I have two arguments to this effect. The first casts doubt on its status as a criterion. The second shows that Wright cannot avoid the Problem of A Priori Error, even if he claims that untrue belief may not amount to a cognitive shortcoming.

The first argument. The point of a criterion for something is to provide a way of recognizing that thing. Normally, a criterion is a condition the fulfilment of which reliably indicates that for which it is a criterion. A criterion that deserves the name, however, will not only be a condition that reliably indicates the presence of that for which it is a criterion, it will also be a condition the fulfilment of which is more easily recognized than that for which it is to serve as a criterion. The colour of litmus paper, for example, is a good criterion for the acidity of a liquid. That's because the colour not only reliably indicates acidity, but it is also easier to recognize the colour of the litmus paper than the acidity of the liquid. By contrast, the concentration of H<sup>+</sup> ions (i.e. positively charged hydrogen ions) is not a good criterion for acidity, because recognizing H<sup>+</sup> concentration isn't any easier than recognizing acidity, even though H<sup>+</sup> concentration reliably indicates acidity.

Another way in which a criterion may fail to be a good criterion is by requiring another criterion for its application, where this other criterion would provide more direct evidence. An example would be the noise of raindrops on the roof as a criterion for rain. This may well be a good criterion in some situations. But consider this situation: my upstairs neighbour often waters the plants on his roof garden, especially when it's not raining. The noise produced by the watering is indistinguishable from the noise caused by raindrops. Being offered the noise as a criterion for rain, I object that the same noise is produced by the watering. In reply, I am told that it is only the noise of *raindrops* that was to be the criterion. I continue to be

skeptical and ask how I can know that a given noise is the noise of raindrops and not the noise of my neighbour watering his plants. The reply to this is: "Well, just look out of the window, and check whether it's raining.". Clearly, the noise of raindrops is not a good criterion for rain in this situation, even though the noise of *raindrops* is a reliable indicator of rain. The problem is that in order to be able to apply the criterion, I need a criterion for the noise being caused by raindrops rather than by my neighbour. If this second criterion is whether it looks like it is raining outside my window, then I might as well have used that criterion as a criterion for rain in the first place.

I believe that Wright's criterion of Cognitive Command, as a criterion for objectivity, suffers from an analogous defect. We are to check whether it is a priori that disagreements within a given discourse involve cognitive shortcoming. If so, we know that the discourse is objective. An objector remarks that it is a priori in any discourse that disagreements involve untrue belief, and wonders how we know whether untrue belief amounts to cognitive shortcoming in any given case. Wright's reply is, in effect, that we ought to find out whether the processes by which we acquire beliefs of the sort in question are properly regarded as cognitive. In a discourse that is plausibly viewed as non-objective, such as comic discourse, we would have to postulate a *sui generis* cognitive faculty for detecting funniness, in order to regard untrue belief on comic matters as cognitively deficient. But this is untenable. So, comic discourse does not exert Cognitive Command and is therefore non-objective.

The problem is that applying the Cognitive Command criterion requires application of a further criterion, namely some criterion for the cognitiveness of the belief-producing faculties of a discourse. But if we could already decide in which discourses our belief producing faculties are properly regarded as cognitive, then we would not need a criterion of Cognitive Command for objectivity. Rather, we would use the more direct criterion, which decides the cognitiveness of a faculty, as a criterion for objectivity. In fact, we don't have a good criterion of this sort. Non-cognitivists and realists in ethics, for example, notoriously disagree on just this: whether there is a proper cognitive faculty for producing moral judgements. Wright also says that it is on the realist to prove we have a cognitive moral faculty. But shifting the burden of proof in this way will not hide the fact that Cognitive Command is useless as a criterion for objectivity: *either* we have an independent criterion for the cognitiveness of a belief-forming faculty, in which case Cognitive Command is useless be-

cause the criterion of cognitiveness provides a more direct criterion. Or we do not have an independent criterion for the cognitiveness of a faculty, in which case Cognitive Command is useless, because it cannot be applied without having such an independent criterion for cognitiveness. Perhaps there is a useful criterion for the cognitiveness of a faculty. But if there is one then *this* would be the criterion for objectivity we are looking for, and not the criterion of Cognitive Command, just as the criterion for rain will not be noise of raindrops, but rainy looks outside.

Before I present the second argument, a little recapitulation. My aim is to find a suitable criterion for objectivity in order to find out what a notion of truth must be like if every content is to be truth-evaluable without this having controversial objectivistic consequences. We want to be able to say that the contents of all sentences are truth evaluable without thereby pre-deciding issues such as the objectivity of matters of taste or the objectivity of probability. One candidate for such a criterion is Crispin Wright's criterion of Cognitive Command. It could be shown, however, that there is a difficulty with this criterion, if plain error (untrue belief) is to count as cognitive shortcoming. For in that case, any truth-apt discourse can be shown to exert Cognitive Command. Wright's response to this difficulty was to insist that untrue belief may not amount to cognitive failure. My first argument made clear that Wright's response renders Cognitive Command useless as a criterion. My second argument is going to show that Wright's response to the Problem of A Priori Error does not really solve that problem.

By any standards, truth is a norm on belief (and on assertion). To believe (or assert) something not true is to commit a mistake of some kind. A purported notion of truth that doesn't meet this constraint is not a notion of truth at all. Wright will admit this much, because he himself argues this point at length in his confrontation with deflationism (pp. 15-18). Now, since untrue belief (or error for short) is a mistake, the two schemata (NE) and<sup>1</sup> (NE\*) derivable from the equivalence schema show that any disagreement on any topic must involve a mistake on the part of at least one of the disagreeing parties. But someone who denies the objectivity of some area of discourse, aesthetic discourse, say, will insist that there can be aesthetic disagreement without anyone making a mistake. If I say that the picture is beautiful and you say it is not, it doesn't yet follow that one of us is making a mistake, or so the aesthetic anti-realist will claim. He will not be appeased by Wright's assurances that even though a mistake is involved,

nevertheless no *cognitive* mistake need be involved. Rather, he will draw the conclusion that aesthetic judgements are not evaluable in terms of truth.

Might Wright not say that untrue belief isn't really a very serious mistake? No, for that would conflict with the role of truth as a norm. In what sense could truth be a norm, if believing something untrue were not really a very serious mistake?

One could put the point by saying that Wright faces a dilemma. If he claims that truth is a norm (as he rightly does), then his project of providing a metaphysically neutral notion of truth fails. For a notion of truth that entails that disagreements are always the symptom of someone's being mistaken is not metaphysically neutral. If, on the other hand, he plays down the seriousness of the mistake one makes when believing something untrue, then it looks like his notion of truth is not really a norm.<sup>12</sup>

The difficulty raised by (NE) and (NE\*) is profound. It suggests that no truth notion could be metaphysically neutral, because mere truth-aptness will always ensure that disagreement is down to someone's error. In the next section we shall see that this suggestion is wrong. There is a truth notion that avoids the connection between truth evaluability and objectivity.

### 6. *A new criterion for objectivity*

In the last section I argued that the problem of a priori error cannot be circumvented by stipulating that Cognitive Command requires more than just a priori untrue belief. The second argument in particular showed that if Cognitive Command requires more than a priori untrue belief, then the compatibility of truth-aptness with lack of Cognitive Command will not yet suffice to make truth-aptness compatible with objectivity in the appropriate sense. The possibility of a discourse that is truth apt yet lacks Cognitive Command will not be enough to free the assumption of global truth aptness from unwanted objectivistic consequences. For even a discourse that lacks Cognitive Command in Wright's sense will be objective in the sense that any disagreement within the discourse is the symptom of one party making a mistake.

Nevertheless I believe that the basic idea of the Cognitive Command criterion is useful. There is a difference between those topics on which we think we may legitimately disagree and those where disagreement shows that someone has made a mistake. This is manifest in our discursive behaviour. Suppose you and I have just departed on a journey and I assert that the lights are still on in the living room while you deny it. It would be absurd

to suppose that none of us has made a mistake, and that we are therefore both right. Only one of us *can* be right, and we know that. It is also clear that if the lights are still on, then we ought to turn back to switch them off. So we will try to find out who is right and who is in error and perhaps compare the reasons we each have for our belief, i.e. argue about the matter. The fact that we do argue shows that we take it for granted that only one of us can be right. Now suppose that we are in a restaurant and deliberate about what to order, planning to share a meal. I assert that haggis is tasty, you deny it. In this situation we will not necessarily take it for granted that one of us must be in error. Perhaps we will assume that neither of us is in error about the taste of haggis. In this case, we will not argue about it, at least not about the question whether haggis is tasty, though we might argue about what to order, whose preference ought to be taken into account etc. Thus, in this case we do not take it for granted that only one of us can be right. I think that one would not misdescribe this difference by saying that we take it to be an objective matter whether the lights are off, while we take it to be non-objective whether haggis is tasty.

How do we know that a question is objective? We seem to know this a priori, that is, we only need to know what a disagreement is about, and that is enough for us to know whether error must be involved. But what is the source of this knowledge? Wright's comparison with representational devices is instructive here. Why do we know a priori that if two representational devices, two cameras say, yield conflicting representations, then one of them must be malfunctioning? That is because we know what the function of a camera is. It is part of the concept of a camera that well-functioning cameras cannot yield diverging outputs. Someone professing to know a priori that two cameras with conflicting output are not both functioning properly is not boasting to have magical powers. Rather, he thereby shows a good grasp of the function of a camera. Cameras are humanly designed to serve a certain purpose, to fulfil a certain function. That's why, as humans, we can know a priori what it is for a camera to function properly. The same goes for our a priori knowledge that disagreements on certain topics must be the result of some mistake. For this is part of the function of certain beliefs, and of their linguistic expression. It is part of the function of beliefs on whether the lights are on that if two such beliefs are contradictory, a mistake has occurred. It is not part of the function of judgements of taste that divergences are the symptom of some mistake.

In fact, these functional constraints on beliefs arise within a complex interpersonal functional system of belief acquisition, reasoning, communi-

cative belief expression and action. Let me sketch this out a little (bit). Some beliefs, such as beliefs on matters of taste, have an intrinsically motivational role. The constraints concerning the acquisition of such beliefs are therefore different from those governing beliefs that are motivationally inert. Part of these constraints governing belief acquisition are constraints on communicative processes. Thus, the status of a communicative situation in which two speakers assert contradictory contents<sup>13</sup> will vary depending on the subject matter, because beliefs on different subject matters may have fundamentally different functions. In some subject areas, two contradictory assertions by different speakers will therefore count as the symptom of error and warrant discussion and/or further investigation. In other areas, contradiction among two different thinkers will not count as a sign of error. Any thinking and communicating agent knows these differences in subject matter just in virtue of being a competent thinking and communicating agent.

I have offered no adequate support for this functional view of judgement and communication, nor have I described it in much detail. For present purposes, it has to suffice to hint at the sort of theory which grounds the claim that there are a priori differences in the status of disagreements. The a priori character of these differences in status stems from certain functional constraints on belief formation and communication. Some evidence for this is provided by the manifestation of these differences in our communicative practices.

On this theoretical background, I now want to put forward a new criterion of objectivity, one that leaves no room for Wright's response to the problem of a priori error. For any  $p$ : it is an objective matter whether  $p$ , just if

(CO) For all thinkers  $A$  and  $B$ : it is a priori that if  $A$  believes that  $p$  and  $B$  believes that not- $p$  then either  $A$  has made a mistake or  $B$  has made a mistake.

There are clear cases of contents that are objective and also clear cases of contents that are not objective according to this criterion. For instance, my earlier example of the content that the lights are off, is a clear case of an objective content. My example of the content that licorice is tasty, is a clear case of a content that is not objective (or so I hope). There are also cases that are not so clear, such as moral contents. It is not immediately clear, I think, whether of two thinkers who contradict each other on whether

cheating on one's spouse is bad, one must have made a mistake. Similarly, it is not immediately clear whether it is a priori that disagreements on matters of probability must involve a mistake. The fact that cases such as these appear at first unclear, should not discourage us. On the contrary, it reflects the notorious controversies that arise over the objectivity of moral issues and probability. If these areas were to come out as more objective than matters of taste yet less than fully objective, this would be a desirable result. I believe that (CO) can be refined to allow a gradual classification of topics into more or less objective ones.<sup>14</sup> For the moment, however, I shall operate with (CO) in examining what a notion of truth must be like if it is to leave room for truth-ap<sub>t</sub> contents which are nevertheless not objective. This is the task of the next section.

### 7. *How to Solve the Problem of A Priori Error*

We now have a clearly defined aim: a notion of truth which is such that the mere truth evaluability of a content does not yet guarantee its objectivity in the sense of (CO). On the other hand, we are now back to where we were in §4: the problem of a priori error. The new criterion for objectivity doesn't yet bring us any closer to solving this problem. Rather it sharpens the problem in that it precludes the inadequacy of the Cognitive Command criterion which allowed Wright seemingly to evade the problem of a priori error. The problem is clear-cut: if we are to accept each instance of (ES):

$$(ES) \quad T(p) + p$$

and consequently each instance of (NE):

$$(EN) \quad \text{not-}T(p) + T(\text{not-}p)$$

then it seems inevitable that of any two thinkers *A* and *B* who believe contradictory contents one must have made the mistake of believing something untrue. There thus seems to be no room for contents that are candidates for truth but are nevertheless not objective according to (CO).

Only a radical manouver can make room for contents that lack objectivity, the manouver of relativising truth. Suppose that contents are evaluated as true or false only in relation to entities of a certain sort -entities that I will call "standards". Suppose further that thinkers possess standards at times, and that truth is a norm in the sense that one ought to believe only

what is true in relation to one's own standard. Then we can avoid the problem of a priori error. When thinker *A* believes that *p* and thinker *B* believes that not-*p*, it is now possible that neither *A* nor *B* has made a mistake. For *p* might be true on *A*'s standard and not true on *B*'s standard.

I am well aware that many readers will find the idea of relative truth not worth serious consideration. If relativism about truth is the only way in which it can be denied that truth evaluability entails objectivity, then doesn't that amount to a *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea of truth without objectivity? Doesn't that show that we must look elsewhere for a solution to the problem of objectivity (see §2 above)? So, before I go on, I'll need to do a bit of convincing in order to make clear that the approach is very well motivated and far from absurd.

First, I would like to make a methodological point. My reasons for advocating a form of relativism can be put into an argument of roughly the following form. At the beginning stands the realization that the following set of attractive assumptions yields a contradiction:

- (A1) The content of each sentence is evaluable in terms of truth.
- (A2) For all *p*: if it is true that *p*, then it is not true that not-*p*; and if it is true that not-*p*, then it is not true that *p*.
- (A3) Believing something that is not true constitutes a mistake.
- (A4) Some topics are non-objective, i.e. for some *p*, *A*, *B*: it is possible that *A* believes that *p*, *B* believes that not-*p*, but neither *A* nor *B* has made a mistake.

Each assumption can be independently motivated. (A1) is motivated by my considerations in §1. (A2) follows from a minimal assumption about truth, namely the assumption that each instance of (ES) is correct. (A3) follows from an equally minimal assumption about truth, namely that it is a normative notion. (A4) is not only intuitively compelling, but moreover denying it would show many of our cognitive practices to be fundamentally misguided. Nevertheless, (A1)-(A3) jointly entail the negation of (A4).

It seems as if one of the assumptions must go. But a more subtle move is available. Instead of denying one of the attractive assumptions, we can introduce a conceptual refinement: contents get evaluated as true or false only in relation to a standard. Short of denying any of the assumptions, we only need to reinterpret them in the light of the conceptual refinement. In particular, throughout (A2) "true" needs to be understood as making reference to the same standard:



(A2\*) For all contents  $p$  and all standards  $s$ : if it is true in relation to  $s$  that  $p$ , then it is not true in relation to  $s$  that not- $p$ ; and if it is true in relation to  $s$  that not- $p$ , then it is not true in relation to  $s$  that  $p$ .

(A3) requires reinterpretation of the normativity of truth. This is where the idea of standard possession comes into play: thinkers possess standards, so that the prohibition of untrue belief gets restricted to beliefs that aren't true on the thinker's own standard:

(A3\*) Believing something that is not true according to one's own standard constitutes a mistake.

Under the conceptual refinement, the assumptions are no longer incompatible. Two thinkers can have contradictory beliefs without it being a priori that one of them has made a mistake. For as long as their standards are distinct, it is possible that neither of them has made a mistake. The motivation for the refinement -for the relativisation of truth- is that it allows us to save all four assumptions at least in their reinterpreted form.

In order to win sympathy for this form of argument, I want to present an analogous argument which I believe to be acceptable to all readers. This is the argument for the relativity to times of temporary features. Some Presocratic philosophers saw a great problem in the fact that the occurrence of change requires that the same thing possess and lack a certain feature. Something's turning pink, for example, requires that the same thing is and is not pink -a contradiction. Unlike Parmenides, who (seems to have) concluded that change is impossible, we tend to make the less radical Aristotelian move: the same thing is not pink at one time and pink at a later time. No contradiction is required. Whether something is pink is relative to times.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the Aristotelian point of view is now taken for granted -so much so that we find it difficult to understand how Presocratic philosophers could have been puzzled by the problem.

Why do we go along with Aristotle on this matter and dismiss Parmenides' view as absurd? We want to save the possibility of change and the impossibility of true contradictions. So we make the relativistic concession that features such as pinkness are relative to times. Relativity saves the common sense assumption that change is possible.

I did not bring up the example of relativism about temporary features because I regard it as a particularly interesting or controversial form of relativism. Rather, I wanted to win your agreement that the kind of reasoning by which we arrived at this form of relativism is a perfectly legitimate

one: we motivate a form of relativism by the fact that this form of relativism allows us to save some common sense assumption. Similarly, my earlier argument used the fact that the relativity of truth to standards can save assumptions (A1)-(A4).

Of course, these arguments do not prove conclusively that truth is relative or that the possession of temporary features is relative to times. Nor do these arguments suffice to justify, by themselves, the conceptual change they are used to motivate. What is needed in addition is that the new conceptual framework be theoretically fruitful. Relativism about temporary features has already proved, in more than 2000 years, that it is a fruitful framework. Relativism about truth, however, is still associated with a highly unsuccessful paradigm, namely Protagorean relativism, which is widely (and in my view rightly) regarded as absurd and unviable. Protagorean relativism has highly counterintuitive consequences, for example the consequence that error is impossible.<sup>16</sup> This consequence alone is enough to render this form of relativism a theoretical dead-end. But Protagorean relativism is not the only form of relativism about truth. The form I advocate does leave room for error. I therefore ask the reader not to dismiss relativism about truth out of hand.

A number of further issues remain to be addressed. A more detailed theory of standards and standard possession is needed to back up my proposed form of relativism. Certain restrictions on standard possession will then ensure that relativity to standards does still leave room for discourses that are objective according to (CO).<sup>17</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Compare, e.g., Quine 1970 and Horwich 1990.
- 2 It might seem that this is not a great loss because we could easily replace the truth predicate by phrases such as "I agree with Wolfgang.". The truth predicate is, however, not so easily replaced. Consider for instance "If what W. says is true, then he is not, after all, making false allegations."-a replacement of the antecedent by "If I agree with Wolfgang...." does not preserve the meaning of the sentence.
- 3 "Aesthetic" in a wide sense, which includes matters of taste in general.
- 4 A denial of global truth evaluability does not, of course, make abandoning truth conditional semantics immediately necessary. Expressivists such as Blackburn (1984, 1988) have argued in favour of a split semantics: standard truth conditional semantics for unproblematic sentences, and non-truth-conditional expressivist semantics for problematic sentences. I have argued elsewhere that split semantics is not a viable option (see my 1997).

- 5 Denying (a) will typically involve the claim that (1) is elliptical for, or equivalent to, something like (1\*): "Licorice is tasty for me." I reject such claims because they ignore important differences in meaning between (1) and (1\*). Evidence for these differences would, for example, be the fact that answering "No, it isn't." to an utterance of (1\*) will typically amount to a reproach of insincerity, while this is not so with (1). Denying (b) is what the so-called "expressivists" do. I have argued elsewhere that expressivism leads to a complete abandonment of truth conditional semantics (see my 1997).
- 6 Even though Wright severs the tie between realism about a discourse and the admission that its sentences are truth-apt, he does not deny the connection between truth and the facts. To be true, according to him, is indeed to correspond to the facts, but the notion of fact here is as minimal and metaphysically lightweight as is the notion of truth (p. 34). Thus in making out a contrast between objective and non-objective areas of discourse, recourse to the notion of fact will not help within Wright's framework.
- 7 Wright's other criteria mark out different aspects that are associated with realism: mind-independence (Euthyphro Contrast) and ontological or epistemological basicness (wide cosmological role).
- 8 A criterion for  $X$  is often just a sufficient condition for  $X$ . Cognitive Command is presumably sufficient and necessary for objectivity, thus it is not only a criterion for objectivity, but lack of it is also a criterion for lack of objectivity.
- 9 Even though they cannot agree on this criterion if it is read in Wright's way, as I shall argue in §6.
- 10 My derivation of (NE) from (ES) is analogous with Wright's derivation of an analogous schema from the disquotational schema. See Wright 1992, p. 20.
- 11 Similar difficulties are raised by Wright himself, p. 149; by Williamson 1994, p. 140; and by Shapiro and Taschek 1996, p. 84.
- 12 Shapiro and Taschek (1996) raise an additional difficulty for Wright. They argue that untrue belief cannot fail to constitute cognitive failure in those discourses where truth is evidentially constrained, i.e. where there is no truth that could not be known. For if someone believes that  $p$  and it is false, then it is true that not- $p$ . But if truth is evidentially unconstrained then one *could* know that not- $p$ . But someone who falsely believes that  $p$  when he could know that not- $p$  is guilty of cognitive shortcoming.
- 13 "Contradictory" is to be understood in a purely syntactical way here and throughout the paper: a pair of contents is contradictory iff one is the negation of the other.
- 14 One way of refining (CO) would be to restrict the range of people whose disagreement indicates error to people who are related in a specified way:  
 (CO\*) For all thinkers  $A$  and  $B$  who are  $R$ -related: it is a priori that if  $A$  believes that  $p$  and  $B$  believes that not- $p$  then either  $A$  has made a mistake or  $B$  has made a mistake.
- Different substitutions for  $R$  in (CO\*) will yield criteria for different degrees of objectivity.
- 15 David Lewis (1988) thinks that some temporary features are intrinsic and not relational, and therefore prefers to resolve the problem by relativising the individuals that can have those features.

16 But not even Protagorean relativism is easily refuted.

17 I would like to thank the participants of the Barcelona-Hamburg workshop for their comments and Mark Sainsbury for discussing Cognitive Command.

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