

# NON-OBJECTIVE TRUTHS: COMMENTS ON KÖLBEL'S CRITERION FOR OBJECTIVITY†

Dan LOPEZ DE SA\*

\* Departament de Lògica, Història i Filosofia de la Ciència, Universitat de Barcelona,  
Baldiri Reixach s/n, 08028 Barcelona. E-mail: dlopez@trivium.gh.ub.es

BIBLID [0495-4548 (2000) 15: 38; p. 229-234]

I enjoyed reading Max Kölbel's deep and interesting paper. I have learned a lot about points and arguments I am not entirely familiar with, and it has helped me to articulate better my own intuitions about the subject. In particular I share with him the intuition I would now articulate as follows: there are contents  $p$  of utterances of declarative sentences like, for instance, 'Licorice is tasty', such that it is not an objective matter whether  $p$ . This is the claim that there are non-objective truths and falsehoods, and it is a plain consequence of global truth-evaluability, i.e. the view according to which the content of utterances of *all* declarative sentences are truth-evaluable. For in this case one, unless radical objectivist, has to accept that for some such contents it is not an objective matter if they are true nor it is an objective matter if they are false. And Kölbel has presented some reasons for such global truth-evaluability: philosophical and linguistic semantics presupposes it, classical logical validity presupposes it, and we do in fact attribute truth to contents of utterances of declarative sentences of any sort.

Now Kölbel's paper deals with the difficulty of reconciling the two views mentioned, global truth-evaluability and non-global objectivism, difficulty raised by *the problem of a priori error*. This is the problem that, given several minimal assumptions on truth, the mere truth-evaluability of a content seems to make any disagreement concerning its truth-value yield a priori that one of the participants of the disagreement is committing the error of believing something untrue. This can be seen by the following argument (A):

- (i)  $p$  is truth-evaluable
- (ii)  $A$  believes that  $p$  and  $B$  believes that not- $p$ .

- (iii) If  $B$ 's belief is true, then  $A$ 's belief is not true (by (i) and (NE))  
 (iv) If  $A$ 's belief is true then  $B$ 's belief is not true (by (i) and (NE\*))  
 (v) Either  $A$  or  $B$  has an untrue belief (by (iii) and (iv))

where

- (ES) True( $p$ ) iff  $p$  (platitude)  
 (ES\*) not-True( $p$ ) iff not- $p$  (by ES)  
 (ES\*\*) True(not- $p$ ) iff not- $p$  (by ES)  
 (EN) not-True( $p$ ) iff True(not- $p$ ) (by ES\* and ES\*\*)  
 (NE\*) not-not-True( $p$ ) iff not-True(not- $p$ ) (by NE)

How does the problem of a priori error raise a difficulty for the compatibility of global truth evaluability with non-global objectivism? I think that a good way to summarize it is by the set of propositions very similar to the one offered in the last section of the paper:

- (1) The content of each declarative sentence is evaluable in terms of truth.
- (2) 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  $p$ .
- (3) Believing something that is not true constitutes a mistake.
- (4) Some topics are non-objective.

But (1)-(3), assuming the validity of (A), ensures that any disagreement concerning  $p$  involves a mistake of some of the participants. And that entails the negation of some elucidations of (4). Consider the criterion for objectivity suggested by Crispin Wright: a discourse exerts Cognitive Command (CC) if and only if

[i]t 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 (Wright, 1992, p. 144).

If CC is a necessary and sufficient condition for objectivity then we have the following (simplified) reinterpretation of (4):

- (4<sub>CW</sub>) There are some contents  $p$  such that it is possible that, for some thinkers  $A$  and  $B$ ,  $A$  believes that  $p$ ,  $B$  believes that not- $p$ , and no cognitive shortcoming of  $A$  nor  $B$  is involved.

But now consider the addition of (5):

- (5) The kind of mistake involved in (3) constitutes a cognitive shortcoming.

Then, assuming the validity of (A), (1)-(3), and (5) entail  $\neg(4_{CW})$ . One natural move is to reject (5), and this is the one taken by Wright when he claims that not all violations of the truth norm constitute cognitive shortcomings, for the shortcomings might be *non-cognitive*.

Now Kölbel has two arguments against such a move: *First*, if CC is to be a *criterion* for objectivity then it cannot be the case that it requires "another criterion for its application, where this other criterion would provide more direct evidence" (p. 217). But CC does not satisfy this condition, for to know if some untrue belief counts as cognitive shortcoming one has to know "whether the processes by which we acquire beliefs of the sort in question are properly regarded as cognitive" (p. 218), but then

*either* we have an independent criterion for the cognitiveness of a belief-forming faculty, in which case Cognitive Command is useless because 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 (pp. 218-219).

*Second*, even if Wright was right about the falsity of (5), it would still be true that any disagreement in any discourse will imply, provided (1)-(3), some mistake of some of the participant. But is not this precisely what someone who is willing to deny the objectivity of a certain discourse denies?

I have two worries about these two arguments. To the first, it is not very clear to me to what extent the weight Kölbel is attributing to CC as a *criterion* is really relevant here. At least this is justified if my presentation of the problem in terms of the *compatibility* of (1)-(4) rightly captures Kölbel's intentions. For the epistemic facts concerning the status of a condition as a criterion that Kölbel points to, even if true, do not alter the status of the condition as a condition, and that suffices for the compatibility issue. The question of whether a certain condition is sufficient for another condition is independent of the question of whether the knowledge that the first condition obtains is sufficient to acquire the knowledge that the second obtains. To illustrate with Kölbel's own example: you can not gain the knowledge that it's raining by knowing that you're hearing the noise of

raindrops, for if you know the latter there is no knowledge to gain not already possessed. But even if this is so, the condition of it's being raining is (presumably) sufficient for the condition of there being the noise of raindrops, and therefore they are compatible. Analogously, if Kölbel is right then we can not *know* the non-objectivity of a given discourse by *knowing* that it fails to exert Cognitive Command in that for knowing the latter it is needed to know something else that suffices to know the first. But still *it can be the case* that some discourse is not objective given that it fails to exert Cognitive Command, compatibly with the contents of utterances of its declarative sentences' being truth-evaluable (if the considered solution to the difficulty raised by the problem a priori error works).

To the second, I don't see why Wright could not claim that an affirmative answer to the previous question simply begs the question against him: insofar as I can see, to claim that "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" (p. 219) in the present context is simply (equivalent) to assert (5) and not an argument against rejecting it.

Kölbel takes the point about disagreement without mistake to be the key for a criterion for objectivity, and proposes to reformulate (4) as:

(4<sub>MK</sub>) There are some contents  $p$  such that it is possible that, for some thinkers  $A$  and  $B$ ,  $A$  believes that  $p$ ,  $B$  believes that not- $p$ , and no mistake of  $A$  nor  $B$  is involved.

But now the difficulty raised by the problem of the a priori error is, as he himself notes, even stronger, for (1)-(3) straightforwardly entail  $\neg(4_{MK})$ . So (1)-(3), and (4<sub>MK</sub>) (roughly the (A1)-(A4) of p. 18) are incompatible, and one of them has to go, what given the minimality of (2) and (3) means that (1) or (4<sub>MK</sub>) has to go. And neither can easily go: there are philosophical, semantic, logical and commonsensical reasons not to deny (1) (see section 1) and rejecting (4<sub>MK</sub>) entails a hardly defensible global objectivism, if Kölbel's elucidation of objectivity is on the right track. Instead of trying to give up some of (1)-(4<sub>MK</sub>), Kölbel proposes to introduce a conceptual refinement: make truth everywhere *relative* (to, say, standards), and hence, to have instead of (1)-(3) before, the following:

(1\*) For all content  $p$  and for all standard  $s$ :  $p$  is evaluable in terms of truth-relative-to- $s$ .

- (2\*) 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 not true in relation to  $s$  that not- $p$ , then it is not true in relation to  $s$  that  $p$ .
- (3\*) Believing something that is not true according to one's own standard constitutes a mistake.

And now (1\*)-(3\*) are compatible with (4<sub>MK</sub>), for "[as long as their standards are distinct] two thinkers can have contradictory beliefs without it being a priori that one of them has made a mistake" (p. 225).

There are many questions about the notion of relative truth, starting with the status of the things to which truth is relative, but I would like to concentrate the last part of my commentary on another, in some sense "prior", issue. In particular I would like to ask about an alternative way of elucidating the (lack of) objectivity in (4) that may be, insofar as I can see, compatible with (1)-(3) as they stand. Consider the suggestion that CC is just a necessary condition for objectivity, and that an additional necessary condition for objectivity is to fail the "Euthyphro test". Let me explain. According to some, some concepts are more intimately connected to certain responses of its possessors than others. In particular for some concepts it seems plausible that there is a biconditional that connects something falling under them with the disposition of certain subjects to elicit certain responses under certain conditions such that (i) its truth is knowable a priori by the possessors of the relevant concepts, and (ii) the subjects, responses, and conditions are substantially specified, i.e., avoiding "whatever-it-takes" formulations. Now call *euthyfronic* a concept for which there is some biconditional of the kind mentioned, and also *euthyfronic* a property signified by an euthyfronic concept. Call *Euthyfronism* in the present context the view that the contents  $p$  about which an instance of (4) is defensible are among those that involve the attribution of an euthyfronic property.

Now insofar as I can see, Euthyfronism is a promising alternative to relativism about truth. Even if much more must be said before it sounds plausible, it seems compatible with the view expressed in (1), and it can avoid to talk of beliefs that "have an intrinsically motivational role" to account for disagreements not based on mistakes, given that the relevant responses can be attitudes other than beliefs, e.g. desires. Finally, even if it turns out to be the case that Euthyfronism essentially involves relativism of some sort, be it on content or somehow more pragmatic, I think it hardly

could count for relativism about truth, for insofar as I can see, all the difficulties that arise for this relativism should also arise for relativism about truth.

*Notes*

† Research for this work has been partially founded by a FI grant of the Generalitat de Catalunya. I thank Óscar Cabaco, Manuel García-Carpintero, Max Kölbel and Manuel Pérez for very helpful comments.

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