Conceptual relativism

Non-dualism versus Conceptual Relativism

Peter Kügler • University of Innsbruck, Austria • peter.kuegler@uibk.ac.at

1 | Introduction

In this paper, the term “non-dualism” denotes Josef Mitterer’s view that descriptions that seem to refer to a language-independent reality actually refer to prior descriptions. The objects of descriptions “from now on” are the descriptions “so far” (Mitterer 2011: I §21). This implies that descriptions are not true or false in a realistic sense. If language does not refer to reality, the latter cannot confer a truth value (“true,” “false”) on descriptions. Truth cannot be correspondence or any other relation between language and language-independent reality.

I will show in the following that this view is unjustified. I will do so by defending a version of realism against non-dualism. More precisely, I will argue for conceptual relativism, which Mitterer criticizes under the name of “framework relativism.” Since any philosophy of truth and reality, whether constructive or critical, needs a firm basis in semantics, questions of meaning and reference will dominate the discussion.

In the next section, I will briefly compare Mitterer’s non-dualism with the prosentential theory of truth and with Robert Brandom’s theory of linguistic reference. I will also review Mitterer’s argument against dualism. Section 3 is devoted to pragmatic semantics, that is, to the idea that meaning is use. Brandom has developed an elaborate version of pragmatic semantics by substituting “inferential roles” for Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “language-games,” but I will stay closer to Wittgenstein’s own approach. My defense of conceptual relativism in section 4 will be based on the view of language in his Philosophical Investigations (Wittgenstein 1958).

Non-dualism

Mitterer’s non-dualism has many similarities to other positions in epistemology, philosophy of language, and metaphysics that cannot be discussed here in full. As far as “truth” is concerned, it resembles the “prosentential theory of truth” that was developed by Dorothy Grover, Joseph Camp, and Nuel Belnap (1975) and later defended by Brandom (1994: ch. 5). Despite its name, however, the prosentential theory is not so much a genuine theory of truth but rather a theory about how the word “true” functions in discourse, which makes it a “deflationary” approach. The leading idea behind it is
the same as Mitterer’s: extralinguistic reference is to be replaced with intralinguistic or “anaphoric” reference. However, whereas the prosentential theory claims anaphoric reference only for “prosentences” (sentences including the word “true”) Mitterer seems to hold that all kinds of description anaphorically refer to other pieces of language.

The rejection of realism about truth, which Mitterer shares with the adherents of the prosentential theory, is by no means a mainstream view in philosophy. Most philosophers, and perhaps also most non-philosophers, would agree that language can be used to describe the world outside of language, and that a true description of how things are is true because the world really is as described. Furthermore, it is fair to say that the history of philosophy, beginning with Plato and Aristotle and comprising the history of science for most of its part, reveals a preference for realism as well. Of course, this is not to say that realism has already won the game against its opponents. But it suffices to shift the burden of argument to the latter. Let me express it this way: the “default setting” of philosophy includes a belief in reality and truth, which seems to be backed by everyday thinking. Hence you will need some good arguments to remove this belief.

In this respect, Mitterer does a better job than the prosentential theorists. When advertising their theory as an alternative to more traditional theories of truth, Grover, Camp, and Belnap offer a rather curious argument against the view that truth is a relation between language and reality:

The point of the inferentialist order of explanation is not to object to using representational locutions to talk about semantic content. Inferentialism must be understood instead as a strategy for understanding what is said by the use of such locutions. The objection is only to treating representational locutions as basic in the order of semantic explanation. (Brandom 1994: 496)

For Brandom, the content of propositions is given by inferential relations, and because inferring is a kind of doing or knowing-how, semantics must be based on pragmatics. This alone, however, does not imply that truth is not a relation between language and reality. In the next section, we will see that Brandom makes additional, “rationalist” assumptions to achieve this result. We will also see that a pragmatic semantics is compatible with the existence of extralinguistic referential relations.

In contrast to the prosentential theorists, Mitterer supports his viewpoint using an argument against “dualism,” that is, the distinction between language and world, description and reality. His argument goes like this: a dualist wants to distinguish between, say, the apple on the table and the description “the apple on the table is green.” By drawing this distinction, the dualist must use another description, such as “the apple on the table.” (I follow Mitterer in using the word “description” both for asser-
truth conditions, causal chains, and the distinction between meaning (sense) and reference (denotation). A common view has it that referential relations are determined by the meanings of words and sentences. So it seems that an investigation of meaning would be a good starting point for highlighting the relation between language and reality.

In my opinion, the lack of semantic reflection is the biggest shortcoming of Mitterer’s non-dualistic philosophy. Neither does he consider sufficiently what other philosophers have said about meaning, nor is his own reasoning backed by any elaborate view of semantics. This becomes particularly obvious when Mitterer moves from the criticism of the language-world duality to the claim that descriptions have other descriptions as their “objects.” This is a semantic claim that should be justified by a conception of how descriptions get their reference fixed. In Mitterer’s non-dualism, however, this move is completely ad hoc.

3 Pragmatic semantics

There are too many theories of meaning to deal with all of them here. Since Brandom already appeared in this paper as one philosopher who shares Mitterer’s rejection of representational truth, let us have a look at his pragmatic approach to semantics. As Brandom explains in an interview, a pragmatic semantics is

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The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words ‘block,’ ‘pillar,’ ‘slab,’ ‘beam.’ A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. – Conceive this as a complete primitive language.”

(Wittgenstein 1958: §2)

A main difference between Brandom and Wittgenstein is that the first one takes asserting and inferring as basic speech acts on which all other speech acts depend. Conceptual faculties arise from the ability to give reasons and ask for reasons. This assigns a central role to assertions, which are the building blocks of inferences. For Wittgenstein, in contrast, asserting and inferring are just two among various equally important language-games. In §23 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he gives a tentative list that includes different kinds of asserting and inferring, but also such things as giving orders and obeying them (which is at the top of the list), play-acting, making a joke, translating, asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, and praying.

This multiplicity of language-games reflects Wittgenstein’s idea of language as a tool (or rather, a whole tool-box) for communication. Language is used for interacting with people and with the world. In this process, we refer to things and describe facts, but this is just a by-product, an auxiliary tool, of our communicative and practical efforts. Of course, giving and asking for reasons is also a kind of communication. For Brandom, however, this aspect has priority over other aspects of language use, as he assumes that all conceptual faculties, and thus all language-games involving concepts, depend on inferential faculties. This is Brandom’s “rationalist” prejudice.

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, leaves no doubt that many types of language-games are more or less on a par with each other. They mix and intersect; they are related by dependence and exclusion, but there is no fundamental game on which all others are based. This already becomes clear from the above example, where general terms are used to talk about building-stones. Although nobody asks for reasons or gives reasons in this game, Wittgenstein suggests regarding it “as a complete primitive language,” because when the builder A calls out the words and the assistant B brings the appropriate stones, a sort of conceptual classification is at work.

The latter is explicitly denied by Brandom, for whom the interaction between A and B is not “a language game – it is a set of practices that include only vocal, but not yet verbal, signals” (Brandom 1994: 172).
From Wittgenstein's point of view, however, this set of practices already involves conceptual capacities. Wittgenstein's example also shows how referential relations, conceived as extralinguistic relations between words and objects, are created when people interact with each other and with the world by linguistic means. As a matter of fact, although not of necessity, reference is often established by ostensive acts:

"An important part of the training will consist in the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing the child's attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word; for instance, the word 'slab' as he points to that shape. [...] This ostensive teaching of words can be said to establish an association between the word and the thing." (Wittgenstein 1958: §6)

In subsequent paragraphs, Wittgenstein considers what is meant by an "association" between words and things. He concedes that "one can reduce the description of the use of the word 'slab' to the statement that this word signifies this object," yet warns that "assimilating the descriptions of the uses of words in this way cannot make the uses themselves any more like one another" (§10). Later in the text, he compares signifying to marking an object with a sign or "attaching a label to a thing" (§15). The picture of "reference" that arises from these remarks is the following: words are used in different language-games, and in many of them they are used, among other functions, to refer to objects. However, reference is nothing prior to or above usage, for reference consists in certain aspects of use. If words were not used in practical circumstances, in dealing with things and talking to persons, they would not refer to anything. How reference is interwoven with use is summarized by Wittgenstein in this paragraph:

"What is the relation between name and thing named? – Well, what is it? Look at language-game (2) or at another one: there you can see the sort of thing this relation consists in. This relation may also consist, among many other things, in the fact that hearing the name calls before our mind the picture of what is named; and it also consists, among other things, in the name's being written on the thing named or being pronounced when that thing is pointed at." (Wittgenstein 1958: §37)

Strictly speaking, reference is itself a multifaceted phenomenon that covers more than one aspect of use. Practical relations between persons (speakers) and things in the world are the most salient ones for our purposes, as these relations connect the words spoken with the reality outside of language. Wittgenstein's approach to language is at once pragmatic and realistic and therefore provides an alternative to Brandon's rationalism within pragmatic semantics. In the next section, I will use it to defend conceptual relativism against the attack of non-dualism.

4 | Conceptual relativism

In the hands of some realists, the distinction between language and reality takes the form of conceptual relativism – the view that truth depends on conceptual schemes or frameworks. This does not mean, however, that truth is merely a matter of linguistic construction. The truth value of an assertion not only depends on which concepts are used in which way, but also on whether the assertion is made true by the non-linguistic reality, the latter being "something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes" (Davidson 1974: 12). For example, "the apple on the table is green" can only be true in a framework that includes the concepts "apple," "table," and "green," but it is true if there really is a green apple on the table.

As Donald Davidson notes, the discourse of conceptual relativism is governed by typical metaphors. The most important one, which is also mentioned by Mitterer, is the idea that reality is "organized," "structured" or "divided up" by conceptual schemes. One advocate of conceptual relativism, Hilary Putnam, compared the conceptual structuring of reality with cutting cookies from a rolled-out dough. Reality is like the dough, and concepts are like cutters with different shapes. We may want to add that conceptual frameworks are like different sets of variously shaped cutters. But Putnam dislikes the comparison anyway.

He dislikes it because, when talking about the dough, we are "forced to answer the question, 'What are the various parts of the dough?'" (Putnam 1987: 33). He thinks that we will be tempted to choose one description as the best or the most adequate one, and to interpret the frameworks as mere variations or rearrangements of the entities identified by that description. We will perhaps say that the dough really consists of flour, butter, eggs, sugar, and so on; we may even describe these ingredients in chemical or physical terms, as carbohydrates, proteins, molecules, and atoms. In other words, for Putnam, the metaphor of the cookie cutters is misleading because it suggests that reality can be described as it is, independently of any framework. Alternatively, we could see this description as just another framework. Then the error would consist in the idea that one framework is better than the rest because it contains the true description of reality.

Davidson makes a similar point. When we talk of a reality that is differently "organized" by conceptual schemes, we already must have a description in mind, that is, a way the reality is divided into objects prior to any reorganization by conceptual schemes:

"We cannot attach a clear meaning to the notion of reorganization of a single object (the world, nature etc.) unless that object is understood to contain or consist in other objects. Someone who sets out to organize a closet arranges the things in it. If you are told not to organize the shoes and shirts, but the closet itself, you would be bewildered. How would you organize the Pacific Ocean? Straighten out its shores, perhaps, or relocate its islands, or destroy its fish." (Davidson 1974: 14)

Mitterer discusses "framework relativism" in the introduction and the first ten paragraphs of the first part of Das Jenseits der Philosophie and rejects it for being a version of dualism. He admits that some of his criticism already presupposes the non-dualist standpoint (2011: I §10), but it is also possible to extract from his discussion two substantial counterarguments to conceptual relativism.

The first one is similar to the arguments put forward by Putnam and Davidson: When we say that some reality is "organized" or "interpreted" by conceptual schemes, we must presuppose that this reality had already been organized or interpreted before those conceptual schemes were applied to it. This line of thought appears...
in Mitterer’s discussion of Wittgenstein, for example in §6 of the introduction where Mitterer examines Wittgenstein’s idea that things are seen according to an interpretation (Deutung). One of the examples cited by Mitterer is the drawing of a triangle, which, as Wittgenstein writes, “can be seen as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing; as standing on its base, as hanging from its apex; as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object which is meant to stand on the shorter side of the right angle, as a half parallelogram, and as various other things.”(Wittgenstein 1958: 200e)

Not surprisingly, Mitterer objects that calling the triangle a “triangle” is itself an interpretation. Thus, for Mitterer, the interpretations mentioned by Wittgenstein do not refer to an uninterpreted reality; they are just interpretations of an antecedent interpretation.

Mitterer’s second argument is that conceptual relativism is a “philosophical variant of apartheid politics” (2011: I §8). A conceptual relativist who thinks to have found the “truth” within his or her own framework cannot decide whether an alternative description is “false” and belongs to the same framework, or whether it belongs to a different framework and therefore does not matter as a competitor. Nobody can determine which of these two options applies, because there is no framework-neutral authority that describes reality as it is. Hence, a rival point of view can always be assigned to a different framework (“apartheid”) in order to avoid any real conflict.

Both of Mitterer’s counterarguments depend on the same premise. This premise denies that we have access to reality as it is independently from descriptions, interpretations, languages, conceptual frameworks, and the like. As there is no such access, we cannot say of a description that it refers to a previously uninterpreted reality. Nor can we decide by investigating that uninterpreted reality whether a second, perhaps contradictory, description belongs to the same reality whether a second, perhaps contradictory, description belongs to the same conceptual framework. However, “the triangle has nine sides” could be true in a different framework in which “side” means something else, or in which “counting” is done in an unusual manner.

The only way to decide between these possibilities is by making some practical tests. It would be instructive, for example, to hear what Josef says about other triangles or how he counts other things. If his arithmetical judgments are inconsistent or show no regularity at all, we will perhaps conclude that Josef, although knowing some number words, does not know how to count (like two or three year old children who pretend to count by using words they learned from elders). In that case, we would have no reason to put the arithmetical judgments into a different conceptual framework. We would simply take them as false.

On the other hand, imagine that Josef correctly identifies the sides of the triangle by pointing to each of them. After watching how he “counts” the sides of the triangle and other sets of objects, we understand what “counting” means for him: he goes three times around the triangle, thus counting each side thrice. He does the same when counting other things. Alternatively, assuming that the perimeter of our triangle is just nine centimeter, we could imagine that Josef “counts” the sides by measuring their lengths and adding up the numbers. Thus, when we expect him to “count the sides” of a geometrical figure, he really measures its perimeter. For Josef, then, “How many sides?” means “How long is the sum of the sides?” In each of these two scenarios, it would be reasonable to say that the arithmetical judgments belong to a conceptual framework different from ours, as they are based on a different kind of “counting.”

Consider what people are doing and you will often be able to identify the referents of their words and the truth-conditions of their statements. Although some conceptual relativists believe that this identification will always be ambiguous and that the “inscrutability of reference” (Quine 1968) will never go away, this does not mean that there is no extralinguistic reference at all. In some circumstances at least, behavioral differences allow us to conclude that people refer to different objects in the world – just as behavioral similarities allow us to locate people in the same conceptual framework.

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5 Conclusion

With regard to semantics, Mitterer’s non-dualism is built on poor ground. We find no argument for the fascinating claim that the objects of descriptions are other descriptions, except for the criticism of realism that indirectly serves as such an argument. As to the latter, however, I have tried to show that realism is defendable against the challenge of non-dualism. Conceptual relativism is the brand of realism that I have chosen for this dialectical exercise. My outline of conceptual relativism was backed by pragmatic semantics, that is, by the idea that meaning is use. The fact that Brandom’s theory is biased towards rationalism was the reason why I preferred Wittgenstein’s language-games to Brandom’s inferential roles.

In some sense, Mitterer’s philosophy is extraordinary and therefore controversial. Not many philosophers will follow him in replacing the duality of language and reality with intralinguistic reference. Most of those who deny that truth is a relation between language and reality do not deny the existence of truth altogether, but give some “anti-realism” or “epistemic” analysis of the concept of truth. Perhaps no philosopher has ever stated “anti-realism” or “epistemic” analysis of the concept of truth altogether, but give some “anti-realism” or “epistemic” analysis of the concept of truth. As to the latter, however, I have tried to show that realism is defendable against the challenge of non-dualism. Conceptual relativism is the brand of realism that I have chosen for this dialectical exercise. My outline of conceptual relativism was backed by pragmatic semantics, that is, by the idea that meaning is use. The fact that Brandom’s theory is biased towards rationalism was the reason why I preferred Wittgenstein’s language-games to Brandom’s inferential roles.

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This socratic-platonic motive is still alive in non-dualism. In contrast to most intellectualists, to be sure, Mitterer uses this idea to undermine the very notions of “reality” and “truth.” Starting from the assumption that only concepts can give access to reality, he maintains that language does not refer to reality at all. He should have better dismissed the intellectualistic prejudice. How do we come in contact with reality? By living in it, by acting with objects, and by communicat -

References


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