Perspective in Representation

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This essay is an attempt to set out a view of our assertoric forms of discourse that is broadly representationalist and realist in character but that makes room for the role of perspective in the representation we achieve. There are two sorts of opposition to the viewpoint defended. One is a neutralist realism that would reject the perspectivism of the view; the other is a form of perspectivism that would reject the realism. I try to situate my perspectivist realism midway between these extremes.

The paper is in three sections. In the first, I offer an account of realism that enables us to distinguish between two versions, the one neutralist, the other perspectivist. In the second I outline a general case for the perspectivist aspect of the position I defend, and in the third for the realist character of the view. I hope that the discussion in the second section may make the view more congenial for those drawn to perspectivism, the discussion in the third more attractive for those who are wedded to realism.

1. Realism, neutralist and perspectivist

Let a discourse be a system of talk or thought, involving terms and concepts that range over a certain domain, and predicate certain properties within it. While presupposing the reality of suitable properties, particulars and functions in its domain of reference, the discourse will allow for the formulation of a range of more specific, divergent theories. It might be a discourse about minds or the past or theoretical entities, or any such limited domain, or it might be a complex of such discourses. Realism — representational realism, in full dress — is a doctrine about such a system or body of discourse. It makes two core claims, one representational, the other realist.¹

First claim

The first, representational claim is that the propositions put forward in the relevant body of discourse — the propositions expressed in assertoric sentences — are representational or truth-conditional. They say, intuitively, how things are and they are true or false, and worthy of being sustained or rejected, depending on whether things are
the way they say they are. Let the way things are according to the assertoric use of a sentence ‘p’ be expressed by the assertoric use of that very sentence. Then ‘p’ is true if and only if p, as the usual disquotational schema has it. And, more specifically, the truth of ‘p’ is explained by its being the case that p; there is a genuinely explanatory relationship in place and the p-way that things are does the explanatory work.

The message here is intuitive and straightforward but needs annotation in order to guard against deflationary readings. I assume that at least in general truth-value is bivalent, as in classical logic; there is no deep reason in our representational capacity or in the nature of reality that argues against bivalence (pace, Dummett 1973). And I assume that its being the case that p — things being as they are said to be in the assertoric use of ‘p’ — is something substantial enough to play the role of explaining the truth of ‘p’. This is to assume that the sentence ‘p’ is fit to be true or false — it is truth-apt — in a robust or non-minimal sense; it is of such a kind, for example, that it can give the causally relevant content of a belief (Jackson, Smith and Oppy 1994; pace Price and O'Leary-Hawthorne 1996).

Second claim

The second, realist claim that is central to representational realism begins from the assumption that the propositions in any body of discourse presuppose the reality of certain properties or relations: those that they predicate of particulars, or relate to one another, or just cast as having instantiations. The claim is that those properties and relations are not unreal in a way that would deprive the propositions in general of truth-value; it is not the case that the propositions, failing a presupposition, have no truth-value or, in an alternative rendering, that they are universally false. Suppose that the claims involve the ascription of certain properties, ‘F’ and ‘G’ and ‘H’. Then this second claim entails that such properties are capable of instantiation in the actual world, so that there is no deep reason why the propositions in the target discourse should not be true.

The first, representational claim is rejected by a family of approaches, ranging from instrumentalism to expressivism, to fictionalism, to a certain minimalism about truth and truth-aptness. This second, characteristically realist claim is rejected by a set of approaches that we might describe as eliminativist. Thus the eliminativist in ethics will
say that there are no value properties and so that all evaluative claims fail to be true (Mackie 1977). And the eliminativist in psychology will say that there are no intentional states and so that all attitudinal ascriptions fail to be true (Churchland 1979).

Two versions of representational realism

So much for the core claims of representational realism. There are two versions in which these claims may be maintained, one neutralist, the other perspectivist. The neutralist realist holds a view of representations according to which the fact that they have a certain content — the fact that they say that things are thus and so — holds independently of any idiosyncratic facts about the subjects of the discourse. That content remains fixed independently of, for example, the habits of classification, the patterns of affect, or the interpersonal practices that come naturally to those subjects. Whatever establishes the content of the claims made in a discourse, therefore, it is independent of such subjective variations.

The alleged independence means that the discourse would make it possible to give an account of the world that is not contaminated by any contingencies of perspective. It would offer a possibility for mapping the world, in a favorite realist metaphor, from a truly neutral standpoint. People might vary in what they saw as salient classes, or in their affective sensibility, or in their interpersonal practices, or in any such subjective manner. But still, at least in principle, they would be able to access the representational system associated with the discourse under discussion. They would be able to suspend their parochial habits and judge the world from the same neutral point of view. The representational content of the discourse would be independent of classificatory, affective or practice-related variables.

Perspectivist realism would deny such independence in one or more dimensions. And in doing so, it would ascribe a perspectival character to the discourse, depicting the mapping system it provides as a relatively parochial mode of charting reality. The participants in that discourse might still be said to be mapping the world but their mapping would be inseparable, for example, from certain classificatory inclinations, affective dispositions, or interpersonal practices. Their mapping system would not chart
the world in neutral terms that might be accessible from just any point of view; its terms would presuppose parochial contingencies in one or more of these dimensions.  

Both forms of realism, neutralist or perspectivist, would have to defend the idea that there is one world that is depicted in different realist discourses. Or so at least I shall assume. But they would differ about the ways in which that world is mapped in those such discourses. For the neutralist realist, proper realist discourses would each be accessible across possible variations among rational creatures, and would be capable of being put together in a single mapping system, equally accessible to all; the different discourses would contribute to that overall system by mapping different parts of the one world or the same part of the world at different levels of detail or resolution. For the perspectivist realist, realist discourses would not necessarily allow of this easy alignment. They would constitute different ways of taking the world, being tied to different mapping contingencies and conventions. And since those mapping perspectives could vary wildly, the discourses might sustain a riot of topsy turvy narratives — narratives that did not obviously add up to a unified, comprehensive story.

The difference between the two realisms, in a slogan, is that whereas the neutralist version holds by a doctrine of one world, one map — strictly, one mapping system — the perspectivist alternative allows that there may be one world and many maps or mapping systems. I go on now to present some considerations in favor of perspectivist realism. In the next section I make a case for the perspectivist aspect of the approach and in the third section for the realist.

2. For **perspectivist realism**

**The problem for neutralist realism**

The problem with the neutralist version of realism is that it relies on a view of how representations get established that is quite mysterious. A descriptive semantics for any body of discourse will link each referring term to a particular individual or kind, each predicative term to a certain property or relation, each functional expression to a designated function, and so on. And then an explanatory semantics should be able to explain for each sort of term why it is that that term, as used by participants in the discourse, designates this or that particular or property or function (Stalnaker 2004). The
problem for neutralism, however, is that it does not have a persuasive explanatory semantics to play this role.

Neutralism will have to explain semantic linkages — say, the linkage between a certain predicate and a corresponding property — without invoking any contingency in speakers to account for the linkage. But it is extremely hard to see how semantic linkages might get established other than on the basis of contingent habits of extrapolation that people find they share, whether on the basis of biology or as a result of being involved in certain cultural practices.

The problem in the case of basic observational predicates

The problem is easily illustrated with basic observational predicates of the kind that people can presumably master without relying, at least entirely, on definitions in independent terms. The basic observational predicates may differ from person to person, for all we need to suppose, and equally they may differ from one stage to another in a person’s life; what serves as a basic predicate for me at one stage may later come to be defined in independent terms. But for each person at each time there must be some predicates that are at least partly mastered on a non-definitional basis, whether one by one or in simultaneous networks. Else there would be an obvious problem of regress.

Suppose, then, that someone is to be initiated in the use of a semantically basic term. For concreteness, imagine that it is the term ‘regular’, as used of various figures and shapes and faces. The term cannot be introduced by definition, and so the speaker must be made aware of its semantic value — must learn to master the term — on the basis of ostension or something like ostension. Those of us who introduce the term must get the person to grasp the property that it denotes and ascribes by presenting exemplars of its application and non-application. Thus we may draw a range of figures, some of a geometrically balanced kind, some of a squiggly variety, and hope to introduce the term ‘regular’ by using it of the former only.

There is a familiar, Wittgensteinian difficulty that is going to dog such an ostensive enterprise, however (Kripke 1982). This is that any set of exemplars, no matter how cunningly constructed, will be finite in extension and will instantiate an infinite variety of properties. They may instantiate the property that we wish our learner to
associate with ‘regular’ but they will instantiate much else besides. The examples will instantiate the property of regularity but they will also instantiate an endless variety of other, perhaps gerrymandered features: being regular-in-the-shapes-presented-or-otherwise-being-irregular, being regular-both-in-the-shapes-presented-and-in-all-three-sided-shapes-or-otherwise-being-irregular, and so on through an open-ended set of possible variations.

This is a serious difficulty. Assume that our learner succeeds in identifying the desired property as the semantic value of the term ‘regular’. Assume that things change with this person in such a way that we can now say that ‘regular’ in his or her mouth — as in our mouths — is used to ascribe such and such a property. What can make it the case on the side of the speaker that it is indeed that property, and not this or that other property, co-instantiated in the examples, that becomes associated with the term? What is it that privileges that property among the co-instantiated set of properties, identifying it as the property that answers to the speaker’s newly learned use of ‘regular’?

The perspectivist turn

I think that a story on the following lines, and only something of the kind, can provide the answer.³

a. The property in question — or perhaps an equivalence set to which it belongs⁴ — triggers a classificatory or extrapolative disposition in the speaker. Exposure to that property in the course of training disposes the subject to classify regular objects, and only regular objects, in the same category as the exemplars.

b. Or at least it does this, in cases where there is no divergence from other presumptively coordinated speakers. For the training also induces a self-checking disposition in the speaker: a disposition to respond to divergence from others by taking steps — perhaps just doing things more slowly — that will guard against the possibility that the response in a particular case is prompted by a factor that is not shared among speakers.

c. The speaker comes to identify as the semantic value of the term ‘regular’ that property that satisfies the following specification: it and it alone elicits the classificatory response in speakers of the language, under conditions where there is nothing — no relatively idiosyncratic factor — that might stand in the way of convergence.⁵
This story may suggest that when someone like our subject is introduced to a semantically basic term, then the mastery of that term comes about by virtue of an explicit awareness of the facts recorded in these three clauses. But it is important for the plausibility of the story that this need not be so. The subject may just find the property of regularity salient across different instances, thinking of it as a property that is equally salient to others. The subject may use others to triangulate on the property, relying spontaneously on the unspoken assumption that where it is present and only where it is present, the property will show up in the extrapolative dispositions of different speakers — at least with speakers who are not affected by an idiosyncratic limitation or obstacle. That will be enough for it to be the case that the property is identified as the satisfier of the semantic specification.

This story about how the predicate ‘regular’ gets to connect with the property of regularity, and not any other quality, is decidedly non-intellectual; it does not posit any very sophisticated awareness on the part of ordinary speakers. It presupposes that speakers have suitable classificatory and self-checking dispositions and it proposes that the property becomes available to each as the semantic value of the term — it becomes available for ostension — by virtue of what those dispositions make salient. But speakers need not have any insight into these conditions for accessing the concept. Without any awareness of the dispositions themselves, or of the role that they play, the speakers may each intend to ascribe the property that is here in this figure, as they may point out, and again there — ‘just look!’ — in some other. It will be a property that they each take to be salient to others, as it is salient to them, at least when nothing idiosyncratic is operating on any side.

The idea of dispositions making something salient should not be obscure. Consider the way in which I may know which path is the unique or best route home across a complex city or park or forest. I may not have a map or a set of instructions or even a single image by which to pick out that path as the one I designate when I refer to the route home. I may not have an abstract specification of any sort such that the route home is identified for me as the path that fits that specification. What may be the case is this. I am disposed to start out in a certain direction. At each of a sequence of later points I am disposed to go on in a certain direction from there. Those sequenced dispositions
take me along the route home. And, perhaps without thinking about it, I trust myself to those dispositions; I put myself confidently but unreflectively in their charge. Without being able to specify the route home in any other terms, I can think of it as, well, just the route home: the route, so I take it, that is salient to me; the route that is salient, as it happens, in virtue of my particular dispositions.

There is no room in this analogy for other people but they can easily be put into the picture too. For it may be that I trust my own dispositions only in the context where I can check myself by reference to others, confident that at each point where orientation is required that route will be salient to me or will become salient in the light of checking with others. The route that is salient to me in this case will be the path that answers, not necessarily to my spontaneous orienteering dispositions, but to those dispositions as they operate under the constraint of achieving convergence with others.⁶

Perspectivism with basic observational predicates

The example of the predicate ‘regular’ stands in for a variety of basic observational predicates that we might think of as classificatory primitives: predicates of a broadly observational character on the basis of which other predicates can be defined and a very much richer vocabulary established. The story told so far suggests that those simple predicates are going to be learnable only for creatures like us, who share certain classificatory sensitivities and find similar patterns salient. The mastery of the predicates is going to be response-dependent, as I have put the matter in other contexts (Pettit 2002, Part 1; 2004; 2005; 2007a).⁷ Those who do not share those responses might come to be able to master the terms parasitically, as the color-blind person might master color words; they might take ‘regular’ to mean just that property that the responsively more privileged find displayed in such and such exemplars. But no one will be able to gain a first-hand, canonical mode of mastery without sharing in the relevant responses.

It is consistent with the perspectivist story about classificatory primitives that all the other predicates in our language, and all other expressions more generally, might prove to be definable in such terms, giving us an Aufbau of the kind hailed in positivist ambitions. The base terms would consist in observational predicates, introduced in the response-dependent way described, and all the other terms in the language would be
introducible by means of theoretical definitions, whether atomistic, term-by-term
definitions, or holistic definitions of the Ramsey-Carnap-Lewis variety (Lewis 1986).
The atomistic definitions would take each new term and provide it with its own free-standing account, as in the definition of a bachelor as an unmarried male. The holistic definition would take a number of terms and define them in a network on the basis of the relations amongst them and with other factors, where those relations and other factors are described in the undefined, observational vocabulary. The model here is the holistic definition whereby we might simultaneously define ‘husband’, ‘wife’ and ‘marriage’, using a pre-existing vocabulary of contract and ceremony and the like.

Did this Aufbau possibility materialize, then the perspectivism of the picture presented here might not be particularly disturbing for neutralists; it might not introduce a topsy turvy variety of perspectives and discourses. True, the mapping system in which the world is to be represented would rest on contingencies of sensitivity that may be shared across human beings and that need not be shared amongst all rational creatures. In that sense it would be a system for representing the world, not as it is in itself, but rather as it presents itself to systems that are biologically tuned like us. But the perspectivist connection would be limited to this primitive, classificatory level and would not allow a wild variety of discourses to proliferate.

**Perspectivism with other predicates**

But alas for the prospect of keeping neutralists happy, the perspectivist connection creeps in at many different sites and in many different ways. For not only do we enfranchise our biologically tuned dispositions and responses in order to give semantic values to primitive, classificatory predicates. We take parallel, semantic advantage of a great number and variety of spontaneous responses, some biologically tuned, others tuned with the help of cultural practice.

Where there is any response that comes naturally to us, and converges in the absence of idiosyncratic, discernible influences, we can introduce a predicate to ascribe the property that reliably prompts that response; it will be that property, the one that is salient to you, as it is salient to me, in the absence of idiosyncratic factors. Or if it is not a property that can be uniquely identified by such a role, it may be that property, connected
in such and such ways with other properties, which has this distinguishing salience as an additional, determining characteristic. It may even be identified in this way, while the other properties in the posited network are identified in a similar manner; they may be introduced in a network on the basis of their presumed connections with one another and their individual, responsive salience.

We human beings routinely avail ourselves of this possibility for generating novel discourses, generating response-dependent terms and concepts with novel semantic values. And that undermines the Aufbau possibility, as we might describe it. Let the language of primitive classification be as rich as you like; let it include all the terms for primary and secondary qualities, for example, as well as the language of causality. Still it is extremely unlikely to be able to provide the means of defining the many terms that assume importance for us in other discourses.

Think of the terms for the beautiful or the comic, the good or the right. These are not definable for us in any primitive, classificatory terms. Rather, they are available to us as terms for properties that evoke characteristic responses and that gain their semantic values, at least in part, on the basis of those responsive dispositions. The property that makes a figure elegant, or a joke funny, or an action cruel, is going to be available for ascription, it is going to have a semantic register and identity, only insofar as our convergent, reconcilable responses help us to triangulate on it.

Think for example of the property that we ascribe to a situation or an action when we say it is embarrassing. We might not understand the property ascribed if we did not see the connection between that property and other features: say, if we did not understand that the embarrassing is often funny to witness and that it is impolite to do embarrassing things. But the property is only going to be available as a predicable feature to the extent that our embarrassed responses make it salient across different situations. Let someone be embarrassment-blind and he or she will only ever have a parasitic grasp of the concept of the embarrassing action or situation; they will grasp it only in the manner in which the color-blind person grasps the concept of red or blue.

Not only will loosely evaluative terms mobilize a batch of broadly affective responses, and thereby establish vocabularies that are autonomous from the vocabulary of
primitive classification. Similar lessons will hold in other areas too. Think for example of the practices that grow up around our interpersonal exchanges, when we see one another as agents, establish a common currency of words, recognize others as speaking for themselves, and find them faithful or unfaithful to the avowals or promises they make. With those practices in place, we enter spaces in which human agents assume an irresistible, intentional profile, present themselves as conversable persons, and elicit our gratitude or resentment as we find them responsible for some good or ill that they do to us. This vocabulary of intentionality and personhood and responsibility is surely tied up with the ways that we connect — the reactive attitudes we form and expect others to form (Strawson 1962) — from within an interpersonal stance. Were Martians capable of thought but incapable of this sort of engagement, then it is doubtful if properties like responsibility and personhood, even properties like intentionality, would be accessible to them.

A Martian of the kind imagined, to go to the most simple case, might look at a computer and see just its engineering characteristics. It would not see it in the manner in which I see it, for example, when I play chess with the machine (Dennett 1979). Adopting the stance of the chess-player I will ignore certain margins at which it fails — if any are perceptible to me — and I will view it as robustly pursuing the goal of winning on the basis of analyses of the board and expectations about my capacities and strategies. For me the computer will have a high-level gestalt, as we might put it, which I make visible by idealizing away from failures; I will see those as due to a breach of favorable performance conditions. But for the Martian that gestalt might be entirely unavailable. Having a much more comprehensive intelligence and insight than me, it might just see a machine that operates by the familiar, low-level laws that govern electronic circuits and might miss the idealized picture that I impose. Its grasp of the engineering detail might be its undoing, making the profile of an agent elusive if not actually invisible.

The topsy turvy of discourses

On the basis of such illustrations, I am prepared to assume that the perspectivist connection has a massive effect on our representational schemes, generating a wild plurality of discourses. In each of these discourses there will be distinctive terms and
concepts, introduced on the basis of discourse-specific responses, which are not likely to be definable in the language of primitive classification or in any other vocabulary. The discourses will be mutually independent codes of talk and thought, each offering a means of limning reality in its own irreducible and characteristic way.

Not only may they be mutually independent, indeed. The discourses may also be mutually inhibiting. It may be the case that operating within one discourse makes it impossible to operate within another. This will typically be the case when the discourses bear on the same domain, as the discourses of electronic engineering and chess-playing strategy may each bear on a computer. When I think of the computer in engineering terms, I will be unable to think of it in chess-playing language; I will be unable to wonder about its strategy with king or queen, seeing only the deterministic processes in the core of the machine. And when I think of it in chess-playing terms, treating it as a center of intelligence and cunning, I will be unable to dwell on its engineering. Were I to switch into engineering mode, indeed, perhaps in order to determine its next move, I would not be playing chess. I would be cheating — and depriving myself of a lot of fun.

We may put this point by saying that these rival ways of mapping the computer are not co-tenable. Seeing the machine both ways at once is as psychologically impossible as simultaneously seeing the drawing of the duck-rabbit as a duck and as a rabbit. This observation is important. It underlines how far the perspectivist turn takes us from the neutralist image of one world, one map. There may be one world, as all realists have to say, but the maps provided by different discourses are liable to be competitive and cross-cutting and give a refracted, prismatic image to the one world they are said to represent. Projected simultaneously in those mapping systems, that world may seem to have the profile of a cubist painting or an Escher drawing.

3. For perspectivist realism

But given such dramatic, perspectivist implications, can the realism really be retained? Perhaps the message is that we should give up on the realism altogether and develop a picture of discourses in general, or perhaps a limited subset of discourses, according to which there is no intent to represent, and no representational achievement to
record. I do not think that this would be a sensible response, however, and in this section I want to indicate why we may hold onto the realism while admitting the perspectivism.

There are two distinct challenges that might be raised against realism on the basis of the perspectivist considerations that we rehearsed. The first and main challenge is that the diversity of discourses possible, under the perspectivist turn, undermines the idea that there is one single world to which they respond; the diversity jeopardizes that idea in the same way that inconsistency would do so. The second challenge is that even if we can think of these discourses as capable of co-existing peaceably, we cannot generally see them as maps that provide guidance, independently of the interest of the guided; we can only see them as guidebooks for predicting where certain interests will be satisfied, where frustrated. I describe the first, borrowing a term from Huw Price (1992), as a pluralist challenge; the second, borrowing from Simon Blackburn (1984) as a projectivist challenge.

3.1 The pluralist challenge

The pluralist challenge is to explain how there can be one world at the representational focus of diverse discourses, when those discourses do not add up in any obvious way to make a single representational system. The assumption behind the challenge is that all would be well if we could see the different discourses as mapping different, complementary parts of a single world or if we could cast the rival discourses in any single area as different ways of positing consistent things. Many discourses bear on the same area, intuitively speaking, and so the core challenge is to explain how they can be cast as making consistent presuppositions and allowing for the possibility of making consistent observations.

This challenge would be readily answered under a standard reductivist story in which the presuppositions of rival discourses can be translated into the terms of one of them — the most comprehensive of the vocabularies — and can be cast as consistent with one another. The pluralist challenge assumes, on the basis of considerations like those rehearsed, that such translation is unlikely to be possible. And so the question it poses is: why in that case should we hold onto the picture that the discourses each represent one domain and one world. If I cannot translate the claims of one discourse into
the terms of a second, rival discourse — or into some common terms — then how can I make a judgment on whether the presuppositions of the two are consistent with one another, as the one-world hypothesis requires?

I am prepared to assume that standard, translational reductivism is false, on the grounds that our concepts in rival discourses may be tuned up by quite different contingencies of biology and practice and may not allow of anything that we might describe as mutual translation. When I think of you as an intentional subject, and certainly when I think of you as a conversable, responsible person, I engage a set of practices and dispositions that are radically different from those engaged in casting you as a neuronal, more or less determinate system. It would be miraculous, then, if the claims made in either language were capable of translation, without loss of meaning or message, into claims made in the other. And so the pluralism challenge gains traction in this and in similar cases. If there is no translation, according to the challenge, then there is no ground for asserting consistency and no ground, therefore, for depicting the discourses as ways of mapping the same world.

My answer to this challenge is that the absence of translation does not entail that there is no ground for asserting consistency between two discourses. I think that we can find ground for asserting consistency in the absence of translatability. I argue for this claim from a particular case where two discourses do not admit of inter-translation but are nevertheless consistent in the presuppositions they make. The case is that of non-indexical and indexical discourse.9

The indexical analogue

Consider the different representational perspectives associated with a purely non-indexical vocabulary, on the one hand, and a vocabulary that includes indexical terms on the other. Indexical terms identify times by reference to time of utterance as ‘then’ and ‘now’; identify places by reference to place of utterance as ‘there’ and ‘here’; identify people by reference to the identity of the utterer as ‘I’ and ‘you’; and so on. Non-indexical terms can identify those very same times and places and persons but will do so without relying on the utterance in which they figure; they will pick them out by names, coordinates, calendars, clocks, and the like.
There is an obvious sense in which indexical facts of any kind — facts that can be truly reported in sentences that use some indexical terms — are consistent with non-indexical. More strongly still, there is an obvious sense in which indexical facts are entailed by certain non-indexical facts, not just consistent with them. And yet in an equally obvious sense indexical facts remain incapable of translation into non-indexical terms.

Think of all the non-indexical facts that actually obtain, including facts about which speakers are at which venues at which times. And imagine now that we exactly replicate the actual world in these non-indexical respects, adding no extra facts on the way (Jackson 1998). Will the replicated world display all and only the indexical facts that obtain at the actual world? More strictly, will it display exactly isomorphic, indexical facts? Of course it will. The facts that I record in ‘I’-sentences, for example, will correspond to exactly parallel facts in the replicated world that my counterpart might record in the same sentences. The facts about the current place or time that are recorded in ‘here’ and ‘now’ sentences will correspond to exactly parallel facts in the replicated world that might be recorded in the same indexical terms.

The message is clear. Let the non-indexical facts about the actual world — or about any possible world — be carried over to a replica world, and indexical counterparts will travel at no extra expense. In replicating the non-indexical facts of the actual world, we replicate the positions of speakers in space and time. And so for any indexical sentences that are true in the actual world, there will be corresponding persons, places and times to make them true at the replica world. The non-indexical facts at each world will fix the truth conditions of the indexical sentences and will determine whether or not those conditions are fulfilled and so whether or not they are true. Keep the non-indexical facts fixed and the indexical will remain fixed. The indexical facts will depend superveniently on the non-indexical.

Suppose that we are given complete non-indexical information, then, on the nature of the world that we inhabit. Will that information leave open further possibilities of an indexical kind? Will it be consistent with the truth of any of a number of mutually inconsistent indexical sentences? And will we have to wait, then, on information as to
which of those sentences is true before the open possibilities are closed? Of course not. 
There can be no bare, indexical difference between possibilities. There are no indexical 
ways things can be that are fixed independently of how things are in non-indexical 
respects. No indexical difference without a non-indexical difference (Lewis 1990, 505). 

But if indexical facts are derivable from non-indexical, it should be equally clear 
that they cannot be translated in any plausible sense into non-indexical. There is no way 
of interpreting indexical reports in non-indexical terms such that the mode of knowledge 
associated with the indexical reports can be equally well provided — even putting aside 
problems of extra complexity — by their non-indexical counterparts. The indexical 
perspective enjoys translational autonomy in relation to the non-indexical. 

Consider any indexical report such as ‘I am in Princeton’ or ‘It is 3.30 p.m. now’ 
or ‘Here is a drinking buddy’. With such a sentence we can always specify when those 
words will express a truth. ‘I am in Princeton’ is true for any speaker S and any time, t, if 
and only if S is in Princeton at t. ‘It is 3.30 pm now’ is true for any speaker S and any 
time t if and only if it is 3 pm at the time of utterance. But while we can produce such 
biconditionals — and, as it happens, such a priori true biconditionals — we cannot claim 
to be able to use them in order to offer the speakers non-indexical ways of registering the 
things that are known, in the mode in which they are known, at the indexical perspective. 

This point is made salient by John Perry’s well-known argument that indexical 
modes of thinking are essential for agents (Perry 1979; Lewis 1983, Essay 10). Take the 
way I think about things when it is appropriate to express my attitudes with indexicals. 
Take the way I think, for example, when I have attitudes of belief that can be recorded in 
sentences such as ‘I am in Princeton’ or ‘It is 3.30 p.m.’. This indexical way of thinking 
naturally makes sense of corresponding actions: recognizing that I am in Princeton 
prompts me to check my email, realizing that it is now 3.30 p.m. prompts me to go to 
afternoon tea, and so on. But suppose now that I did not have attitudes that could be 
expressed in indexicals, only the corresponding non-indexical attitudes. Suppose that I 
could register that P. P. is in Princeton but not that I am PP or that afternoon tea is at 3.30 
p.m. but not that it is now 3.30 p.m.. In such a case, and regardless of the strength of my 
desires, my beliefs would be incapable of prompting me to action. For why should a
belief about P.P.’s whereabouts lead me to do anything, short of knowing that I am P.P.? And why should a belief about what happens at 3.30 p.m. prompt me to take any initiative unless I recognize that it is now 3.30 p.m.?

The lesson is that while indexical facts supervene on non-indexical ones, they are not translatable into non-indexical terms. The facts that are registered from the perspective of indexical language introduce nothing that is not encompassed by facts that are registered in the perspective of non-indexical: it is not as if indexical facts are something over and above non-indexical. And yet the indexical way of conceptualizing those facts — the way of thinking about them that is expressible in indexical sentences — is not replaceable without serious loss by any non-indexical mode of conceptualization. Represent indexical facts in non-indexical fashion and they lose their normal profile and potency; they become incapable of mediating people’s interventions as agents in the world around them.

**Explanation without expression**

In the non-indexical account of indexical phenomena, we are enabled to see from a non-indexical perspective how indexical sentences come to express truths. We can see in non-indexical terms that if the world is thus and so, then such and such indexical assertions will be true, such and such false. In that sense we can give an explanation in non-indexical terms of how indexical statements get to have particular truth-conditions. But while we may explain the appearance of such truth-conditions, we cannot give expression to them in non-indexical terms.

There is very little mystery, happily, about how this can be. The indexical discourse or mapping of the world employs a contingent factor in manufacturing the propositions expressed in indexical sentences: this factor is the identity or whereabouts of the utterer, taken as such. Those propositions are presented either in terms that presuppose the identity of the speaker, as in talk of mine and yours and ours, or in terms that fix the speaker’s location in space and time, as in talk of here and there, now and then. It is the identity of the actual speaker that fixes the reference of ‘I’ and ‘you’ and ‘we’, the location of the actual time and place of utterance that fixes the reference of ‘now’ and ‘here’.
We can see from the non-indexical perspective how that factor plays a background role in the indexical presentation of potential belief contents; we see that for any speaker, for example, a sentence using ‘I’ will be true just in case it is true of that speaker. But we cannot put the factor into play in the same backgrounded way ourselves: we do not enjoy the appropriate speaker identity or location and, even if we did, the restriction to a non-indexical standpoint would prevent us from exploiting it. We can mention or identify the factor that serves a crucial role in indexical representation and we can explain how it serves in that role; but we cannot put the factor to any use ourselves (cf Papineau 1995, 263).

The lesson

What the indexical analogy illustrates is, broadly described, the following structure. There is a relatively narrow perspective, on the one side — the indexical perspective — at which certain patterns are salient: those expressed in the use of indexical sentences and those that must be grasped, by the Perry argument, for anyone intent on action. There is a relatively broad perspective, on the other — the non-indexical one — from which we can see how the narrow perspective operates and can recognize that it is directed to bona fide realities. But while the broader perspective enables us to recognize that the narrower is reliable in this way, it does not itself enable us to represent directly the patterns — those expressed in the indexical sentences — that are salient at the narrower perspective. It enables us to see that there are such patterns to be seen at the narrower perspective but it does not make those patterns directly visible to someone restricted to the broad: to someone stuck with using non-indexical language. What such a person can represent is not the local pattern registered by ‘It is now 3.30 p.m.’ but rather the global pattern whereby a person using that sentence at a certain location in space-time will be detecting a corresponding local pattern.

This structure shows why the perspectival metaphor I have been using is particularly apposite. It corresponds fairly exactly to a structure that may obtain between visual perspectives. In the view that I have from the front row of the balcony in a theater I can see that someone in the stalls will have a rather different perspective on the play: that they will see the facial expressions of the characters in a more natural way, for example,
but not so easily appreciate the tableau that the characters make on the stage. But I cannot embody that perspective in mine, melding them into a single cubist representation. My broader perspective enables me to see, as in the indexical case, that there is a different pattern to be seen at the narrower perspective from the pattern available at mine but it does not allow me to see those patterns at one and the same time.

With the indexical analogy in mind, it becomes possible to see how we can rebut the pluralist challenge. The analogy shows that despite the anthropomorphism that infects our different discourses or mapping systems, by the argument of the last section, still that does not mean that the discourses cannot be assessed for their consistency with one another. There may be a discourse that is more encompassing than other discourses, in the way that non-indexical discourse is more encompassing than indexical. And it may be that while we cannot express the presuppositions or other claims of the special discourses in this more general vocabulary, still we can use that vocabulary to explain how such presuppositions or claims have truth-conditions defined and may have those truth-conditions fulfilled.

I believe that this possibility is realized, being committed to a physicalist or microphysicalist picture of the universe (Pettit 1993a). On that picture, all the furniture of the world is composed of the sorts of entities that exist in the subatomic world that physics postulates. And all the facts that obtain in the world, whether expressed in the language of microphysics or in other terms, are superveniently determined by facts about the properties and relations of subatomic entities; as there are no higher entities that are not subatomically composed, so there are no higher forces that are not subatomically determined. A minimal non-indexical duplicate of the actual world, we saw earlier, is bound to be an indexical duplicate too. According to microphysicalism, a minimal microphysical duplicate of the actual world is bound to be a duplicate in every respect.

Microphysicalism seems like a good bet and I am prepared to assume that it is true. In taking this view, I need not cast it as a discourse, a way of mapping the world, that is free of perspectival slanting, though many may want to do so. If the terms of microphysics are ultimately defined in observational language then they will inherit the perspectivism of the basic observational terms in which, presumably, they are ultimately
defined. What is important to the view taken is the claim that the language of basic science is relatively encompassing; it does not matter whether or not it is taken to be perspectivally shaped.

Given that the language of microphysics — the ideal language of microphysics — is encompassing then it can relate to special representational discourses in the way that non-indexical discourse relates to indexical. From an encompassing microphysicalist perspective, or at least from a routinely physical perspective that fits with microphysics, I may hope to see that there are various factors countenanced that may be employed or put to work in generating different special discourses. And I can see that while the claims made in those discourses need not conflict with any claims to which I am wedded as a microphysicalist, they may constitute claims that I cannot translate into my more general idiom.

Let there be microphysically unexceptional dispositions in human beings to extrapolate from certain exemplars, for example, as they attend to one common property in those examples, but not others. I can see from my larger perspective that those dispositions may be put to work in order to give semantic values to certain terms, as on the pattern described earlier. Seeing that, I can be quite happy that the mapping system thereby generated does not make presuppositions that are inconsistent with my own microphysical tenets. But equally I can expect to find that the presuppositions made, and the further claims to which they lead, will not be translatable into microphysical terms.

This possibility can apply, quite clearly, with special discourses of value and responsibility. But just to make it vivid, think of how it might apply in quite a different case. We human beings deliberate about what to do in different cases and in doing so we each think of various possible actions, various options, as things we can do. But what is this can-do property that we see in options? And is it a property that can be given countenance in a physicalistic world?

I think it is. From the scientific point of view I am a physical system in which actions at least sometimes materialize under a form of deliberative processing over reasons pro and con each option; I assume that such processing may be physically implemented. That means that from my point of view prior to action, various options will
present themselves as consistent with all that is settled up to that point; and, more specifically, will present themselves as subject to determination by reasons pro and con that I have the capacity to track. In order to let them be processed in the deliberative exercise of that capacity, however, I will have to think of them in a certain, distinctive way: as candidates for processing that may or may not end up being chosen; as options, so I will think, that are up to me. And when options present themselves in that way, I will be in a position to ascribe the can-do property to them (Pettit 2007b).  

Just as a non-indexical language will not be able to express indexical truths, so the language of physical science will not be able to give expression to the truth I record when I say or think that an option has the can-do property. But the non-indexical language will allow us to explain how indexical sentences can get to have truth-conditions and how it can be the case that those conditions are fulfilled. And the same is true here. The encompassing, physical viewpoint will let us see what can make true the sentence that I use of a particular option when I say ‘I can do that’. That sentence will be true in my mouth just insofar as I have the capacity to process options deliberatively, the option has not yet been selected in my deliberative processing, and whether it is to be selected or not depends on how the processing goes. 

This is a cheering result. It enables us to see that while there is just one physical world, there are many mapping systems for recording the lie of that world. And it enables us to recognize that while those systems may be entirely consistent with one another, and fit nicely within a broadly physicalist schema, still they can have an expressive autonomy that makes them each valuable and even indispensable. The fundamental unmoving truths of the ultimate microphysics may be comprehensive in one sense. But in another sense they will leave unsaid everything that is important to human experience, interaction and life. Ordinary human concerns dictate that we cannot do without the truths about color and beauty and value, and the truths about minds and persons and responsibility, even the truths about free will. Perspectivist realism would keep the world safe for such truths and yet give those truths the autonomy that they clearly need.

3.2 The projectivist challenge
Unlike its pluralist counterpart, the projectivist challenge does not suggest that there is no prospect of a satisfactory perspectivist kind of realism, only that one or more of the special representational discourses that that realism recognizes may not deserve to be described as maps of an independent reality. They are not maps that give the layout of the terrain in a way that may serve those with any of a variety of interests. They are more like guidebooks that provide information on where certain determinate interests will be satisfied and where frustrated. Taken to its limit, the challenge might be made against the encompassing scheme of representation itself but the usual form of the challenge is more restricted.

Two sorts of guidebook concepts

There are two categories of guidebook terms that have little or no mapping significance. One category is that of explicitly subjective predicates like ‘disgusting’, ‘nauseating’, ‘ticklish’ — even perhaps an earlier example, ‘embarrassing’ — as they are applied to objects or stories, situations or actions. In order to learn the meaning and reference of one of these terms, I must have prior access to the term or concept for the corresponding subjective feeling of disgust or nausea or whatever. The predicates themselves serve to predict where nausea or disgust is to be expected, and where it is not to be expected. They orient those who are anxious to enjoy or avoid the corresponding feelings and provide no more information on the world than is required for that purpose. Knowing about the distribution of the corresponding properties, then, will provide no general help in finding one’s way around the world; it will only give information that bears specifically on the occasions for disgust and nausea and the like that the world provides. The discourses in which the terms figure count as guidebooks for the suitably interested, not as maps in any more ordinary sense.

The second category of guidebook terms is less common and I describe it as a category of collusive rather than subjective terms. Take the terms ‘U’ and ‘non-U’ that Nancy Mitford imagined in the 1960’s and put into circulation. It was U to use certain high-class words and expressions and to display certain manners, non-U to opt for middle or lower class counterparts. Thus it was U to speak of lavatories or loos, non-U to speak of toilets or washrooms; it was U to lay cloth napkins, non-U to use paper serviettes; and
so on. As these terms gained circulation, we may assume that the upper class trendies would have colluded to change the extension of what was U in order always to make a difference between how they spoke and acted and how their less privileged fellows did so. And that being the case, we can see that the terms have no role in mapping the world, only a role in guiding users towards a goal they independently seek: not now the enjoyment or avoidance of a subjective feeling like disgust or nausea, but the achievement of an in-group status.

The projectivist challenge to perspectivist realism is the claim that terms and concepts that are perspectivist in the sense presented are all bound, like subjective and collusive terms, to have significance only in a guidebook exercise, not in a mapping project. Under the perspectivist story told, many of our terms and concepts get to figure in purported representation only in virtue of characteristic contingencies of susceptibility on our part; we used the example of the term ‘regular’ in order to illustrate the possibility. Those susceptibilities, as we argued, need not consist in responses of which we have to be explicitly conscious in order to learn the corresponding terms. Nor need they have an explicitly collusive aspect. But the challenge is to show that this makes a serious difference and ensures that they may have more than the guidebook role of subjective and collusive concepts. I want to argue that it does make a serious difference, guarding against the possibility that all response-dependent concepts have only a guidebook role.

Meeting the challenge

There are few constraints that that the referent of a subjective or collusive concept have to meet. The subjective referent just has to occasion the appearance of a suitable feeling, say of nausea or disgust. The collusive referent has to provide an indicator of suitable convergence with the target in-group. And that is all. Either sort of term may prove applicable, then, without this fact placing any heavy requirements on the way the world is beyond the mind of those who use it. There is a wild variety of ways it may be, consistently with prompting nausea or disgust or any such feeling, and there is an endless variety of ways it may be, consistently with priming an in-group in the use of a term like ‘U’ or ‘non-U’.
Using either subjective or collusive terms means playing a game, therefore, that it is very hard to lose and that there is little or no significance in winning. But this harsh lesson about such terms does not carry over to all terms whose referents are selected on the basis of contingent susceptibilities. Consistently with such susceptibilities playing an important background role, there are many constraints that a term or concept may have to satisfy in order for it to be truly applicable. And so, looking at things from the other side, there may be substantial restrictions on how the world has to be in order to allow the application of the term. Where there are many constraints to satisfy in this manner, it may be easy to lose the game associated with use of the term and there may be real significance in attaining victory.

There are at least five families of constraints that may be relevant to whether a given property should pass muster and be treated as a worthy predicable (Pettit 2002, Part 1, Essay 3). To the extent that a property satisfies such constraints, it can claim to have a part to play in the world at large, not just a part in engaging with our particular kind. It can claim to have a relatively wide cosmological role (Wright 1992).

The families of potential constraints are these.

- **Holistic networks.** Even single-channel responses, such as the sensation by which a color is revealed to us, have to connect with one another in revealing complementary properties, as in the different colors, and have to reveal constant properties over different backgrounds, in different lighting, and from different angles.
- **Multi-modal channels.** Unlike the sensations that uniquely cue us to colors and other secondary qualities, the responses or effects that cue us to primary properties come in more than one mode; we can feel as well as see the volume or movement of an object.
- **Non-psychological effects.** Some of the responses that cue us to primary qualities, such as the effect of mass in making it difficult to move something, or temperature in causing heat and burns, are effects that presuppose only that we are material or biological objects ourselves; they are not distinctively psychological.
- **Scientific vindication.** Even with the properties targeted in single-channel responses, we expect to find scientific vindication of their relatively objective
significance. If the colors of surfaces are profiles of spectral reflectances, for example, they may not count as very important properties; but they will certainly have to count as more than the mere projections of our minds.

- Partial definition. Many of the terms and concepts that are introduced with the help of our natural responses are also required to identify properties that connect systematically with other properties; cruelty must not only evoke revulsion but also fit into a network of ethical concepts of the good and the right, the virtuous and the justified.

We need not go through a rehearsal of examples to see that such constraints are often relevant with the properties that we identify on the basis of our dispositions. To the extent that such constraints are relevant, I think we can be reassured about the potentially objective significance of many of the properties we manage to triangulate on from a perspectival, species-centered viewpoint. We need not be perplexed by the projectivist challenge any more than we need be troubled by the pluralist.

We can agree with those of a pluralist and projectivist mentality, then, that neutralist realism is misconceived and that the discourses in which we make sense of our situation are a wonderfully varied and criss-crossing lot. But this emphasis on the parochial features that shape our takes on the world need not cause us to deny that there is a single world that is charted in those different takes. We can wax enthusiastic about the perspectivism and still remain resolutely realist. This is a domain where we can have our cake and eat it.

References


1 The account of realism follows the broad lines of (Pettit 2002, Essay 2), departing in two respects; it makes the neutralist claim extrinsic to realism, and it casts that claim somewhat differently.

2 I focus on the parochial because of wanting to home in on the contrast between the neutralist and perspectivist approaches. Thus I do not discuss the ways in which we may only be able to grasp the meanings of the logical particles, or notions like entailment and consistency, in virtue of the contingency that suitable inferential dispositions come naturally to us (Brandom 1994). It is more or less possible to imagine rational creatures varying in the sorts of contingencies I do discuss but not to imagine them not having the inferential practices that make logical and related concepts accessible. This observation shows that holding that the mastery of concepts is dependent on certain responsive or related contingencies — holding in that sense by perspectivist claims — does not strictly imply that all those concepts have a parochial character. Parochiality will follow only if the responses are variable across rational creatures, as in many cases they certainly are.

3 Some may think that a direct reference theory could do the job, with a predicate latching onto a causally or contextually present property, regardless of whether the speaker notices anything about that property. But even its staunch defenders recognize that this approach too confronts a problem of the sort mentioned. Thus Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny (1987, Chs 4 and 5) identify a ‘qua-problem’ that is going to make it indeterminate whether one or another property is engaged by the predicate. The problem is that any exemplars whereby the semantic value of a term is to be fixed may figure qua instances of the desired property or qua instances of any of an infinite variety of other properties. Despairing of the direct reference theory, others may imagine that David Lewis’s (1984) theory of elite properties can be introduced here; this would have so-called natural properties or universals count as elite candidates for serving in the role of semantic values. But this theory isn’t promising either. Not only does it seem like a
rigged and artificial solution, it doesn’t plausibly apply to primitive classificatory predicates of the kind discussed here; thus Lewis (1998) himself does not apply it to color terms.

4 It may be that for all the determinacy provided by people’s coordinated takes, over an indefinite time, there is some other property that is co-instantiated in all of those takes with the property of regularity: a property that only comes apart in instances that will never, or can never, be registered by human beings. There may be an indeterminacy as to whether it is regularity or that other property that is truly ascribed. But this indeterminacy will never show up anywhere and so it need not bother us unduly. We may say that the property ascribed is the equivalence class of regularity and any such other, effectively indiscernible property. On these matters see (Pettit 1993b, postscript 1996).

5 Here and in what follows I abstract from some detail that is unnecessary for current purposes. I assume that the specification is to be understood in such a way that the property in question has to be realized in when the responses are forthcoming; the predicate is not idealized like ‘flat’ or ‘straight’ in such a way that nothing need be flat or straight (see Pettit 2002, 107-110). And I abstract from the question as to whether this specification is to be understood in a rigid or non-rigid manner. On the rigid understanding, it is the actual-world property that satisfies the specification which is taken as the semantic value of the term; on the non-rigid, it is the property that satisfies the predication at whatever world we may target in speaking of what is possibly so (see Pettit 2002, 15-16).

6 This analogy is imperfect, of course, insofar as there is an independent test as to whether I have latched on to the route home whereas there is no independent test as to whether I have made contact with a property that deserves to be called ‘regularity’.

7 It may have been a mistake to follow Mark Johnston (1989) in his use of that term. For while he takes a response-dependent concept to be a concept of a disposition in things to evoke the response, I take it to be a concept such that mastering it non-parasitically requires being the sort of creature to whom that response comes naturally. It is not the concept so much as the mastery of the concept that is response-dependent. Having access
to the response is part of the possession-conditions for the concept, to invoke an idea from Christopher Peacocke (1992).

8 For an account of ethical terms that follows these lines, see (Jackson and Pettit 1995).

9 In analyzing this analogue, and using it to develop a model of the relation between different discourses, I draw heavily on an earlier paper (Pettit 2000). But since drafting the current paper, I have discovered that I am following a strategy that is characterized in general terms in (Brandom 2007); for background see (Brandom 2008). That strategy is very much in line, as Brandom mentions, with suggestions in (Price 2004).

10 For the use of a similar, practice-dependent model in explaining how we come to think of certain actions as obligatory, others as forbidden, others again as permitted, see (Pettit 2008).