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CRITICAL NOTICE

Talking with Vultures

Relativism and Monadic Truth, by Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
Pp. vii + 170. H/b £33.49; p/b £18.99

I

At the time of its first publication, relativism was proclaimed by the publisher's advertisement for Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne's book to be "currently the hottest topic in philosophy". Maybe that was commercial license but there is no denying that the debates provoked by the reinvention of relativism as a thesis not of speculative metaphysics but of descriptive semantic theory¹ have been intense and have attracted much attention. Relativism, as understood in these debates, is the claim that, for at least certain distinguished regions of discourse—in the recent literature, the relativistic case has been argued for discourses concerning each of epistemic mights and coulds, knowledge, taste, indicative conditionals, probability statements, and future contingents²—we obtain the best theoretical characterisation of our actual linguistic practice by allowing that the truth value of an assertion is not determined purely by the state of the world in relevant respects³ but depends upon and may vary with additional parameters whose values may be different across different thinkers.⁴

Cappelen and Hawthorne's short book⁵ belongs to the first wave of reaction against this tendency, and at the time of writing remains the only book-length critique of it. Its heart is a systematic defence of a cluster of traditional ideas that together amount to the thesis that its authors caption as *Simplicity*, incorporating the following five ingredient claims (p. 1):

¹ See, for instance, Egan 2010, 2014; Glanzberg 2007; Kölbel 2004; Lasersohn 2005, 2009; MacFarlane 2014; Recanati 2007; Richard 2008; Stephenson 2007.

² Relativism about epistemic modals have been defended, among others, by Egan 2007, 2011, Gillies 2010, MacFarlane 2014; among the advocates of relativism about knowledge are Brogaard 2008, Kompa 2002, MacFarlane 2014, Richard 2004, Stephenson 2007; advocates of relativism about taste include Egan 2010; Lasersohn 2005; Kölbel 2004; MacFarlane 2014, Richard 2008; relativism about indicative conditionals is discussed by Kolodny & MacFarlane 2010, Weatherson 2009; relativism about probability statement has been proposed by Douven 2011; a relativistic treatment of future contingent has been discussed by Belnap, Perloff, and Xu 2001, and MacFarlane 2014.

³ That is, roughly: respects of which mention is made in the assertion.

⁴ This formulation deliberately ignores the distinction between the claim that a certain region of discourse is, in MacFarlane's terminology, *assessment-sensitive*, whereby the truth value of one of its characteristic assertions is allowed to vary with aspects of the context of an assessor, and the thesis—dubbed by MacFarlane *non-indexical contextualism*—whereby tokens of the same type-assertion are allowed to vary in truth-value with aspects of the context of their assertor and without concomitant variation in content. This distinction is of great importance when it comes to predicting patterns of correction and retraction, on which MacFarlane's own strategy of argument for relativism is primarily based. Somewhat surprisingly, though, Cappelen and Hawthorne make little of it. We shall not be preoccupied with it here.

⁵ All page references are to this text unless otherwise stated.

T1) There are propositions⁶ and they instantiate the fundamental monadic properties of truth *simpliciter* and falsity *simpliciter*.

T2) The semantic values of declarative sentences relative to contexts of utterance are propositions.

T3) Propositions are, unsurprisingly, the objects of propositional attitudes, such as belief, hope, wish, doubt, etc.

T4) Propositions are the objects of illocutionary acts; they are, e.g., what we assert and deny.

T5) Propositions are the objects of agreement and disagreement.

It is immediately striking that no relativist need want to demur at any of T2–T5. Indeed, of these four theses, only the last is worthy of comment at this point. T5 is open to weaker and stronger interpretations. Weakly interpreted, it says that any proposition can be a focus of agreement and disagreement: propositions, understood as per T3 and T4, are things whose truth-values thinkers can agree or disagree about. No big deal there. But under a stronger interpretation, T5 says that any genuine agreement/disagreement involves conflicting attitudes to some single proposition in the sense of “proposition” determined by the other clauses: that genuine agreement/disagreement requires convergent/conflicting attitudes to some such propositional content shared between the protagonists. Of course, we customarily invoke the notions of agreement and disagreement in ways that relax that—as when we describe people as agreeing or disagreeing about what they want or what to do.⁷ Still, there is a core notion of agreement/disagreement for which T5 is correct. And this is a crucial point in relativistic thinking, which draws motivation from the thought that it is this notion that is in play in e.g. many disagreements about taste or value. If dining together in a Japanese restaurant, the situation when Greta opines that the sushi is delicious and Elisabeth that it is actually rather bland and slimy is to be captured in terms of the notion of disagreement pointed at by T5 under its strong interpretation, then there has to be a proposition—presumably: <this sushi is delicious>—that provides the focus of the disagreement. And once that is granted, there is no ducking awkward metaphysical questions about the truth-conditions of that proposition, to which relativism gives the answer that Cappelen and Hawthorne are keen to avoid. Hence the general tendency of their argument in this book: to propose a semantic contextualism that enables them deny that, in general, such ‘disagreements’ genuinely count as such under the aegis of T5.⁸ Rather, there is in such cases only an illusion of disagreement; there is, in the Japanese restaurant scenario, no single proposition that is respectively affirmed by Greta and rejected by Elisabeth.

Be that as it may, the point of collision between relativism and Simplicity that Cappelen and Hawthorne intend has to be found in T1. However the formulation above does not seem to be the most felicitous possible for their purposes. For one thing, it is strange to read of ordinary, non-relativistic truth—the (non-deflationary) notion of truth that Cappelen and Hawthorne surely intend Simplicity to evoke in their readers—as characterised as a *monadic* property. Truth, so intuitively understood, is a *relational* property: a property conferred on a proposition by the state of the world in relevant respects. Relativism parts company with truth so understood not in regarding it as

⁶ Cappelen and Hawthorne espouse no particular theory of the nature of propositions.

⁷ See, for instance, Gibbard 2003, Huvenes 2012, 2014, MacFarlane 2014.

⁸ They do allow, though, that certain such apparent disagreements *are* genuine. We’ll come to this below.

relational but in raising the degree of the relation one level: from a dyadic property to a triadic one—a relation between a proposition, a circumstance of evaluation and ‘context of assessment’ or ‘perspective’. But more importantly, as Cappelen and Hawthorne themselves point out, relativists have no trouble introducing a monadic truth predicate, or predicate of disquotation, and an associated truth operator,⁹ and can accordingly agree that propositions lie within its range, and so buy into the letter of T1 to that extent. The crucial point about T1 is thus its inclusion of the word ‘fundamental’: for the relativist, when in a particular context a proposition is correctly characterised simply as “true”, the characterisation will mask the triadic complexity just noted. At the *fundamental* level, the level at which the triadic relationship obtains, no property of truth *simpliciter*, as Cappelen and Hawthorne like to say, is to be found—or at least, none that applies to that proposition.

So, there are issues about what exactly is the happiest formulation of T1 for Cappelen and Hawthorne’s purposes. But maybe its spirit is clear enough. It had better be, for perhaps their most important project in *Relativism and Monadic Truth* is to illustrate how to bring within the sanctuary of T1 those areas of our talk that have encouraged the, in their view, misguided tendency to relativism. The discussion proceeds through four chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the recent debates, of the key moves and terms of art they have generated, and an account of the roots of relativism as a style of systematic semantic theory in the earlier work of Lewis and, especially, Kaplan on the semantics of indexicals.¹⁰ Chapter 2 focuses on the crucial question of shared content, and proposes the agreement-based diagnostic for it that structures the core arguments of the book. Chapter 3 is a critique in depth of the semantic and metaphysical motivations for the kind of (anti-Simplicity) conception of propositional content that informs Lewis’s and Kaplan’s respective treatments of tensed discourse and their introduction of the idea of a temporally neutral proposition (the so-called Operator Argument) which Cappelen and Hawthorne identify as the root of, and core mistake in, the modern movement to relativism. Chapter 4, finally, on predicates of personal taste, attempts to show how (a sophisticated) contextualism, backed by the agreement-based conception of shared content, can provide a satisfying account, in at least this one area. This, in turn, is taken to show how relativism can be avoided and T1 saved consistently with recognition of the role of subjectivity in our talk of taste and avoidance of an extreme and incredible realism about the subject matter. Relativism, they contend, is thus unmotivated even in what might be considered, lay-philosophically, the most promising-looking area for it. In addition, so Cappelen and Hawthorne argue, relativism here encounters serious difficulties with, for example, ‘bound’ uses (e.g. “Everyone at the party will find something fun to do”) and embeddings of relativist contents in factive attitudinal verbs.

This is a large sweep of ground, covered in a brisk, adversarial but good-humoured style, in a short book full of interesting ideas and arguments. In the discussion to follow, perforce highly selective, we mainly concentrate on its treatment of discourse concerning personal taste. To come clean, our sympathies are with two principal claims: first, that Cappelen and Hawthorne do not actually succeed in making out a form of contextualism adequate to discourse of basic taste; second, that contextualism is anyway an unmotivated direction for this particular area—that a much more promising model is provided by *minimalist* conceptions of truth and truth-

⁹ See pp.12-14 and 134-37. The point is emphasised by MacFarlane in his 2014 at pp.93-94.

¹⁰ See especially Kaplan 1989 and Lewis 1980.

aptitude.¹¹ A plague, in short, at least for basic taste, on both the relativist and contextualist houses.

II

Why, or when should anyone be drawn to relativism about some discourse? In John MacFarlane's work on epistemic modals, it is certain putative patterns of correction and retraction in our talk involving epistemic 'mights' that provides the primary motivation.¹² With predications of taste, however, matters are different. Consider again the Japanese restaurant example:

Greta: This sushi is delicious.¹³

Elisabeth: I don't know how you can say that. It is not in the slightest delicious—it's insipid.

Why might reflection on the kind of contretemps illustrated by this exchange encourage relativism? Cappelen and Hawthorne (p. 101) identify the core motivation as that of avoiding a kind of *chauvinism*. Imagining us in dispute with a talking vulture who provocatively affirms that, "Rotting flesh is fabulous; there is nothing disgusting about it at all",¹⁴ they write

...even once it is conceded that there is a common content to "Rotting flesh is disgusting" in the mouths of humans and talking vultures, that does not yet vindicate relativism. But, assuming that we have reason to play the game of broadly truth-conditional semantics as opposed to expressivism, there is now some motivation for relativism. After all, it seems very intuitive to think that there is symmetry between our situation and the vulture's. There would be something bizarrely chauvinistic about claiming the vulture is wrong, we're right, and leave it at that.

And it would impress as similarly bigoted or arrogant if Elisabeth, or Greta, were to flat-out insist, without further ado, on the correctness of her rating of the sushi. Still, this diagnosis is not quite right. The avoidance of chauvinism is at one remove from the real springs of relativist motivation here. Chauvinism/bigotry of that kind presumes a *fact of the matter*—something for one to be right about and the vulture/other guy to be wrong. And if there is such a fact of the matter, philosophy now demands some kind of account of its nature, and of its epistemology—of what it takes to be sensitive to it and of why one might reasonably take it that in the particular case one *is* so sensitive and the vulture/other guy wrong. So the pressure, ultimately, is philosophical, not moral. To anyone who lacks, any clear idea of how such a philosophical story might plausibly run, the attraction of relativism is that it allows one to respect the appearance of genuine disagreement in the examples, but without thereby incurring a commitment to

¹¹ Reference omitted.

¹² MacFarlane 2011, 2014 (Chapter 10).

¹³ Cappelen and Hawthorne castigate a tendency they find in the literature to focus on generic examples like "Sushi is delicious", "Stewed rhubarb is disgusting", "Roller coasters are fun", and so on, suspecting that the well-known vagaries of generics are apt to somehow skew our intuitions about them—see, in particular, p.113. It seems to us open to question whether or why that should be so, but in deference to their concern we will for the most part steer clear of such examples here. However see n. 28 below.

¹⁴ The narrative of *Relativism and Monadic Truth* is punctuated with such phantasmagoric examples involving dialogue with a variety of talking animals such as vultures (pp.100-1), cats (p.113) and rats (p.120). As the authors seem to realise (p.116), the reader may feel some methodological unease at this, but we will not make anything of it here.

regarding at least one of the antagonists as mistaken about the real fact; rather we/Elisabeth can be judging correctly in the light of our/her gustatory sensibilities, and the vulture/Greta correctly in the light of hers, and there need be nothing to choose between the two sensibilities. So the case can be one of 'faultless' disagreement: neither judgement need be out of kilter with the facts; neither judgement need be inappropriately arrived at.

Thus the impetus to relativism in the area of taste, we suggest, is a resolution of the forces exerted by three ingredient, individually attractive, assumptions: a broadly truth-conditional conception of the content of the claims put forward in the kind of *prima facie* disagreement illustrated; an acceptance that such a *prima facie* disagreement is a genuine disagreement in the sense of T5, strongly interpreted; and a rejection of the idea that the world bestows determinate truth-values on the contents thereby in dispute. Expressivism drops the first assumption; contextualism drops the second; (naïve, or rampant) realism the third. But relativism allows us to accept all three.

III

A stock anti-contextualist complaint is indeed the charge of *lost disagreement*: that contextualism comes at the cost of misconceivedly compatibilising the conflicting claims in examples such as this. But how might a relativist (or anyone) argue that this *is* a disagreement in the sense of T5, involving shared content and genuinely conflicting claims expressed in terms of it? And how should a contextualist argue, to the contrary, that there is no such shared content, that there is context-sensitivity in the predicate, "delicious", which prevents it? This is the central issue for Cappelen and Hawthorne's Chapter 2.

One simple and sensible-seeming first thought is that the context-*insensitivity* of an expression shows in its amenability to accurate homophonic speech reporting. Certainly, core indexicals—personal pronouns, tenses, demonstratives—are not generally so amenable. If someone says, "I feel tired", or "It is raining today", for example, another, or someone at a later date, cannot accurately report what was said by using the very same form of words. More generally: if an expression is context-sensitive, there will be aspects of a context of its use, *c*₁, variation in which will cause its semantic contribution to vary; so then, one might expect, a report made in a different context, *c*₂, differing in relevant such aspects, of what was said by the expression's use in *c*₁ will have to use a different expression in order to preserve the appropriate truth-conditions.

This simple and sensible-seeming thought fails. As Cappelen and Hawthorne illustrate, there are just too many counterexamples: expressions whose semantic values are unquestionably sensitive to certain aspects of a context of use but are standardly available for homophonic speech reporting even in contexts differing in just those aspects. The reference of uses of "nearby", for example, is sensitive to the location of the speaker. But if in a transatlantic phone conversation someone says, "There is an excellent Japanese restaurant nearby", her conversant, quizzed about what she said, can perfectly properly reply, "She said that there is an excellent Japanese restaurant nearby." Similarly for "local", "left" and "right", "overhead", "future" and so on. The phenomenon is one of what Cappelen and Hawthorne call *parasitic* context-sensitivity whereby a reporter of an utterance defers to features of the context of the reportee, rather than their own, to fix the contribution of a context-sensitive expression. It is widespread, and it blocks any fast track argument for the context-insensitivity of

“delicious”, e.g., from the fact that one can smoothly report that Greta affirmed that the sushi was delicious and that Elisabeth affirmed that it was not in the slightest.

Cappelen and Hawthorne review a refinement of the simple thought proposed in their own earlier work.¹⁵ The basic idea is that parasitic context-sensitivity is incapable of explaining possibilities of smooth *collective* speech reports, whereby if a number of speakers, Mary and John and Fred . . . , all affirm a sentence S, they may—always?, usually?—felicetously be reported by: “Mary and John and Fred all said that S”. For, assuming S were context-sensitive, and that relevant features of context would (be likely to) vary across Mary’s, John’s, Fred’s, etc., respective utterances, to whose context of use would the semantic value of S as used in the collective report be answerable? As Cappelen and Hawthorne nicely express the matter, a parasite can only feed off one host at a time! But while that is true, “nearby” and its ilk seem to submit to smooth collective reporting too. If in a three-way Skype conversation, John, in his office on the USC campus, affirms “There is an excellent Japanese restaurant nearby” and Herman, in Oslo, affirms the very same words, Jason can perfectly felicitously report: “They are both saying that there is an excellent Japanese restaurant nearby.”¹⁶ The explanation of the felicity, Cappelen and Hawthorne plausibly contend, draws on essentially analogous resources to those needed to disambiguate the two salient readings of:

Herman loves his partner and so does John.

Under the reading relevant here, the property ascribed to both Herman and John is:

. . is an x such that some y is uniquely the partner of x and x loves y.¹⁷

Following that model, the property ascribed by Jason to both John and Herman may be rendered as:

. . is an x such that x said that there is an excellent Japanese restaurant near to where x is.

The felicity of the collective report is thus perfectly consistent with the context-sensitivity of “nearby”.¹⁸

How then, in a controversial case, should battle between a contextualist and an invariantist (of whatever stripe) be joined? In the second part of the chapter, Cappelen and Hawthorne introduce a new range of diagnostics for sameness and difference of content, based on the behaviour of “agree” and “disagree”. Their key thought is that while, in the above example, Jason’s report that both John and Herman are saying that there is an excellent Japanese restaurant nearby is felicitous enough, it would be quite inappropriate for him to report this as an *agreement*—to affirm that John and Herman *agree* that there is an excellent Japanese restaurant nearby. The felicity of that report would require that John and Herman be speaking of the same location. In the circumstances of the example, their each having the property, merely, of saying that there is an excellent Japanese restaurant in their own locality grounds a point of similarity, not of agreement.

This proposal impresses as progress. Spurred by it, Cappelen and Hawthorne put forward (though with some hesitancy it must be said) three specific diagnostic principles whose overall gist, very roughly summarised, is as follows:

¹⁵ See, for instance Cappelen and Lepore 2005 and Cappelen and Hawthorne 2007.

¹⁶ Interestingly there are uses of ‘nearby’ that are not ambiguous and where the ‘distributive’ reading is forced. Jason says: “Herman and John are so lucky to have good Japanese restaurants nearby” where it is known that there’s no Japanese restaurant near Jason and that Herman and John are in distinct locations.

¹⁷ Contrast: being an x such that some y is uniquely the partner of Herman and x loves y.

¹⁸ In the interests of brevity, we here prescind from Cappelen’s and Hawthorne’s own sophisticated discussion of the point and its ramifications on pp. 46-50.

Where sincere utterances of S and ‘not-S’ *cannot* correctly be reported as expressive of disagreement, S is context-sensitive; and where they can, that is evidence of semantic invariance.

Where a pair of sincere utterances of S can correctly be reported as expressive of agreement, that is evidence of semantic invariance; and when they cannot, that is evidence of context-sensitivity.¹⁹

As Cappelen and Hawthorne realise and discuss, there are still points of strain in this general direction but we shall not attempt to explore their proposals further here. What is striking for present purposes is that even a correct capture of the relationship between agreement/disagreement and context-sensitivity/invariance doesn’t promise any immediate leverage on the task in hand. The relativist is saying that, in the Japanese restaurant example, Greta and Elisabeth are in disagreement about the merit of the sushi, that this requires a shared propositional content which they respectively endorse and reject, and that a semantics for the discourse in question should therefore be invariantist. The contextualist is saying that “delicious” is a context-sensitive expression in a way that entails that Greta’s and Elisabeth’s respective assertions are not expressive of a genuine disagreement but are compatible, and that a semantics for the discourse in question should therefore spell out the appropriate form of context-sensitivity. The theorists are accordingly *on the same page* about the connections between disagreement and shared content. What is wanted, in order to adjudicate their dispute, is some *independent* grip on one or other of the intertwined notions: some way, for example, not going via the question of shared content, of determining whether genuine disagreement is involved, or some way, not going via the question whether a genuine disagreement is involved, of determining whether there is shared content.

We do not suggest that Cappelen and Hawthorne are unaware of this. Nevertheless they provide, it must be said, almost nothing by way of the needed independent grip. The issue comes to the fore only in Chapter 4, and there they are content for the most part to make the case for their preferred contextualism simply by appeal to the presence or absence of “intuitions of contradiction” or our “sense” of disagreement in particular cases. Yet these “senses” and “intuitions” are exactly what are disputed by their relativist opponents—the sense of “lost disagreement” is, after all, presented as an intuitive datum that relativism urges we take very seriously.

To be sure, it is not easy to see how to do better. But here is one suggestion.²⁰ If “S” contains context-sensitive expressions, then distinct tokens of “S” in different mouths

¹⁹ So roughly summarised, the proposals invite, to be sure, qualifications and clarifications that Cappelen’s and Hawthorne’s more nuanced formulations address. These do not affect the main point in our comments to follow, so we decline to review them here. For the benefit of a reader who wishes to think further about Cappelen’s and Hawthorne’s proposals, the exact formulations (pp. 54-5) of the three agreement-based diagnostics are these:

- *Agree-1*: Let u be a sincere utterance of S by A in C and u’ a sincere utterance of ‘not-S’ by B in C’. If from a third context C” they cannot be correctly reported by ‘A and B disagree whether S’, then S is semantically context sensitive. Meanwhile, if from a third context C” they can be correctly reported by ‘A and B disagree whether S’, that is evidence that S is semantically invariant across C, C’, and C”.

- *Agree-2*: Take two sincere utterances u and u’ by A and B of a sentence S in contexts C and C’. If from a third context C” they can be reported by an utterance of ‘A and B agree that S’, then that is evidence that S is semantically invariant across C, C’, and C”. Meanwhile, if the report in C” is incorrect, that is evidence that S is not semantically invariant across C, C’, and C”.

- *Agree-3*: Let an A-Triple for a sentence S be a triple consisting of two sincere utterances u and u’ of S by A and B respectively in distinct contexts C and C’, and one utterance of ‘A and B agree that S’ in a third context C”. If, for *all* A-triples involving S, the last member is true, then that is evidence that S is semantically invariant.

²⁰ Reference omitted.

may have different truth-conditions. So distinct token *questions*, “S?”, in different mouths may have different conditions for truthful affirmative answers. Hence if “delicious” and its ilk are context-sensitive, it should be possible to design a pair of conversational contexts within which a pair of tokens of the question, e.g., “Is the sushi here really as delicious as people say?” presented simultaneously to a single agent—maybe a waiter—can respectively properly deserve *prima facie* conflicting yet sincere answers.²¹

This *Forked Tongue* test, as we may dub it, is pretty crude—for instance, it won’t distinguish context-sensitivity from simple ambiguity. Still, its credentials as at least a necessary condition for context-sensitivity seem good. Consider a simple illustration. Suppose Herman and John have been waiting quite a while for a table at the Japanese restaurant, which is very busy, and are wondering whether to duck out and go and eat somewhere else. The head waiter standing nearby is on the phone, and Herman overhears him say, “Yes, sir, actually there is. There is an excellent Italian just two minutes away where they serve superb homemade pasta and seafood sauces. You can almost always get a table without waiting.” Herman says, “Excuse me, but did you say that there is an excellent Italian restaurant just two minutes away?” The head waiter replies, “Ah. Actually, no. I mean: I did say that, but I was talking to one of our regulars about another location downtown.”

Thus: “just two minutes away” passes the test. It was the context of a question of the regular customer, rather than Herman’s, that set the reference of “just two minutes away” in the waiter’s overheard remark. When Herman puts a token of essentially the same type-question, the reference shifts and the correct answer changes.

Can we get a similar result with “delicious”? Let’s try to construct an analogously shaped case, but where the questioners’ respective contexts differ in respect of their standards of taste. We need to presuppose, of course, that the agent questioned is somehow aware of that. So: let Greta and Elisabeth be seated in the Japanese restaurant, yet to order, menus in hand, head-waiter in attendance. Elisabeth mentions that she has never before tried sushi and asks the head-waiter, “Is the sushi here really as delicious as people say?” Greta, a regular customer at the restaurant, is most surprised when the waiter replies, apparently completely seriously, “No, ma’am. It’s not delicious at all.” “I beg your pardon”, Greta exclaims. “Why would you say that? I eat here often, as you well know, and have always found the sushi excellent.” “Indeed it is, madam,” the waiter smilingly explains. “But I was answering your inexperienced friend.”

Thick-skinned contextualists may find this dialogue unexceptionable. We would suggest, to the contrary, that the waiter has chosen a very strange and inept way to convey to Elisabeth that the sushi will (very probably) not be to her liking. Why is that if “delicious” and “excellent” are sensitive to speakers’ standards of taste as “nearby” and “just two minutes away” are sensitive to speakers’ location?

²¹ Why simultaneously? Because restaurant standards—ownerships and chefs, e.g.—can change. (We needn’t require strict simultaneity though. It will be enough to ensure that the material practices in the kitchen are unlikely to have altered within the interval when the two questions are put.) Why a single agent? Because we want to ensure that if different answers are appropriate to the distinct token questions, they are so because of variations in relevant factors operative in their respective conversational contexts, rather than variations in the information of those questioned.

IV

The range of expressions, captioned by ‘Predicates of Personal Taste’, that are included within the scope of the discussion of Chapter 4 of *Relativism and Monadic Truth* is pretty broad. It includes, for instance, “spicy”, “funny”, “disgusting”, “fun”, “nauseating” and “delicious”. However Cappelen and Hawthorne lead off with a discussion of a predicate, “filling”, as it features in e.g., “This pasta is very filling”, that they recognize might seem less than paradigmatic of the ilk. They do so because “a number of the key relevant distinctions can be made, with minimal distraction, using that predicate.” (p.102) Their aim is that “of producing the bare bones of a contextualist story about the truth conditions of claims in which that predicate figures.” The general tendency of the chapter is to build on this to argue that, and illustrate how, a contextualism of the same broad stripe can, in almost all instances, both explain away the appearances of contradiction or disagreement in cases where we intuitively feel they should be explained away and sustain such appearances, in cases where they should be sustained, without recourse to relativistic manoeuvres.

The “bare bones” contextualist semantics is glossed as follows (p. 103):

. . . on an occasion of use, a predication of ‘filling’ to some item will tacitly relate that item to a particular individual or group. In the simplest case, a claim of the form ‘That is filling’, as made by X, where ‘that’ refers to Y, will express the proposition that Y is filling for X (where the truth conditions turn on how X is disposed with regard to Y).

Obviously any such account will provide the resources to disarm any suggestion of contradiction in the simple kind of case illustrated e.g. by a ballerina’s saying of a serving of leek and potato soup that “This is rather filling. I had better not have any more”, and the assertion of a sumo wrestler, of a similar-sized portion, that “This isn’t filling enough; I am going to need several portions at this rate.” That is a good result if it is taken as obvious that the ballerina and the wrestler are not really in disagreement, which Cappelen and Hawthorne assume is so.²²

Included among the “key relevant distinctions” that uses of “filling” serve to illustrate is that between *autocentric* and *exocentric* uses: in the former, the operative perspective is that of the speaker or a group which the speaker belongs; in the latter it is that of a third party or group to which the speaker does not belong. Thus someone may say, menu in hand, “The leek and potato soup won’t be very filling; I am going to have a main course as well”, and then on another occasion in the same restaurant, advising his small daughter what to order, “Be careful: the leek and potato soup will be filling”. Here, very plausibly, there is no serious question of inconsistency, or change of mind, expressed by the two utterances; and a similarly explicable illusion operates, Cappelen and Hawthorne are suggesting, in some of the apparent ‘disagreements’ of taste that provide impetus to relativism.

Well and good. But of course no relativist about taste ought to want to maintain that *all* apparent disagreements involving judgements of taste are genuine disagreements in the sense of T5, strongly interpreted. Relativists are free to take on board the distinction between autocentric and exocentric uses of taste predicates—indeed to write this into the account of how contexts of assessment can vary—nor do they have any interest in denying that there are some uses of taste predicates in which speakers effectively do talk merely about their own propensities. The charge will be, though, that these considerations fall well short of the means to disarm an appearance

²² For the record, one of the present authors didn’t find that obvious at all.

of genuine disagreement in all cases. Indeed, one can foresee one reason why they may fail to do so in a point of disanalogy between “filling” and other, more paradigmatic predicates of personal taste on which Cappelen and Hawthorne themselves remark on at the outset of their discussion (p. 99) but make nothing of. “Filling”, for the purposes of their discussion, is treated as ascribing a disposition to induce a certain distinctive complex of sensations when ingested. It does not express any kind of evaluation. But “funny”, “disgusting”, “fun”, and “delicious”, (though probably not “spicy”, and “nauseating” only in some uses) are predicates of *value*: in applying them in a particular case one places value, positive or negative, on the object, activity, or performance to which they are applied. If one adds to that point the thought—to be sure, it is not an immediate consequence—that in expressing a certain evaluation of something, one thereby presents it as a *fitting* evaluation and represents the object, etc., as *suitable* for it, then one can see how paradigmatic predicates of personal taste may be at the service of claims that are in a crucial respect more *adventurous* than mere ascriptions of dispositions to induce certain kinds of affect and for that reason potentially more controversial and answerable to an additional range of potentially defeating considerations.

Depending on the specific predicate concerned, ‘suitability’ for a certain evaluation may cover a range of possible cases: the object, etc. may be being represented as such that it *ought* to be accorded the value in question, or *deserves* to be accorded the value in question, can at least *appropriately* be accorded the value in question, or can *defensibly* be accorded the value in question, or can *intelligibly* be accorded the value in question . . . and these, even the last, are all, in particular cases, debatable and potentially controversial. Clearly there is ample scope for a much more fine-grained exploration of these nuances of predications of personal taste than we have space to attempt here. The present point is only that, by lumping dispositional predicates like “filling” along with the other usual suspects as all “predicates of personal taste”, Cappelen and Hawthorne encourage neglect of one potential reason why one might expect that some members of the group are more likely to service the expression of genuine disagreements than others.

The ballerina/wrestler and father/daughter examples illustrate two kinds of case where a contextualist semantics of the kind prefigured will—quite correctly, as many will feel—explain away any appearance of contradiction. But there are other kinds of case, Cappelen and Hawthorne emphasise, where, consistently with contextualism, the appearance of contradiction is saved and genuine disagreement occurs. What *doesn't* occur, in their view, is faultless disagreement. Rather, there is a kind of see-saw: if, when further detail is specified, the appearance of disagreement is sustained, the impression of faultlessness will be a casualty; and conversely, insofar as the impression of faultlessness persists, the appearance of genuine disagreement will weaken.²³

In what kinds of case can genuine disagreement be identified consistently with a contextualist semantics?²⁴ Suppose Herman has an invitation to the Warden’s garden party. “I’m going to go. It will be good fun”, he says. “Indeed it won’t”, rejoins John. Three possible cases are:

²³ Cappelen and Hawthorne are quite explicit on this. They write: “Disagreement intuitions subside as ‘no-fault’ intuitions gain ground.” (p.120) and later on they claim “Cases where the sense of no fault runs deep are ones where the sense of disagreement runs shallow.” (p.132).

²⁴ See their discussion on pp.110-1.

(1) Herman is using ‘fun’ autocentrically and John is using it exocentrically to point out that the party will not be fun for Herman—he imputes to Herman a mistake in thinking that the party will be fun for him, believing that when he gets there, he will rapidly feel like a fish out of water.

(2) Herman’s intention is to claim that the party will be fun for a certain group of friends and colleagues who will be there. John corrects him by pointing out that the party will not be fun for him, i.e. John (who belongs to that group.)

(3) Herman, in claiming that the party will be fun, merely intends the claim to apply to himself alone, but John misunderstands him, thinking he’s claiming that it will be fun for both Herman and himself, and is confident that he—John—would hate it if he were to go.

These illustrate the seesaw. In cases (1) and (2), there is genuine disagreement, but no faultlessness—Herman is mistaken in case (2) and, let’s suppose, in case (1) as well. In case (3), there is the same appearance of disagreement (we are supposing that the dialogue proceeds in exactly the same form in all three cases) but this time there is a misunderstanding, with the result that neither Herman nor John need be wrong, but nor are they contradicting each other.

Very well. But what about

(4) Both Herman and John are speaking autocentrically?

This is the case intendedly illustrated by Greta’s and Elisabeth’s exchange about the sushi, and the dialogue with the talking vulture. And so far as we have been able to determine, all that Cappelen and Hawthorne have to offer about it, in the end, is that, insofar as people do have a sense of disagreement or contradiction in such cases—and they do not deny that many people may—they are confused about the content of what is being said. The correct model is supplied, rather, by the ballerina/wrestler examples.

The playing of this “semantic blindness” card is of course a familiar contextualist move in other contexts, notably in the debates concerning contextualism about “knows”. We have no space here to enter into the methodological issues it raises, except to remind the reader that we are here dealing with proposals for *descriptive* semantic theory, and that it is therefore prospectively a critical weakness in such theory if it is forced to pooh-pooh the data of which it is supposed to be giving a theoretical reconstruction.²⁵ The case for relativism, diagnosed as earlier, rests crucially on the impression that there is genuine disagreement in such cases, focused on a shared content—that there is no “talking past” going on. Cappelen and Hawthorne seem prepared in the end—once their repertoire of contextualism-friendly cases is exhausted—simply to insist otherwise. But the fact doesn’t go away that it seems absolutely natural to report that e.g. “Greta and Elisabeth completely disagree about whether the sushi is awful”—in a way that, for example, it would be highly unnatural and misleading to report that “Paul and Tamsin disagree about whether Ottie is ready”, when Paul is talking about Ottie’s upcoming grade six piano exam and Tamsin is talking about her state of dress for the party. The issue is an empirical one but we do not believe that Cappelen and Hawthorne have much support from ordinary speakers’ ‘intuitions’ or ‘senses’ about the kind of cases where the relativist will complain of lost disagreement. In particular, we reject the idea that ordinary speakers’ ‘intuition’ would

²⁵ For an excellent discussion of the issues here, see Baker 2012.

dismiss the sushi case as one of genuine disagreement on the grounds that Greta and Elisabeth are really just obliquely talking about their own personal tastes, though they are, of course, *expressing* their own tastes, and they may—a point we are about to come on to—*retreat* to talking about their own personal tastes.

But we are spinning our wheels, rather. Again, how is shared content, or the lack of it, to be *argued* for? Maybe the Forked Tongue test gives us some purchase on the matter. We will suggest, though, a different way past the threatening *impasse*.

V

There is, in ordinary discourse, a distinction in use between what we shall here dub the *objectifying* idiom exemplified by “This sushi is delicious” and “The party is going to be fun” and the corresponding *subjective-relational* reports: “I find this sushi delicious”, or “This sushi tastes delicious *to me*”, and “I’m going to enjoy the party” or “The party will be fun *for me*.” Moreover it appears that the objectifying claims are in general treated as somehow stronger; witness that, in a wide class of contexts, a subjective-relational claim provides a fall-back when an objectifying statement runs into difficulty. Greta asserts, “The sushi is delicious” but then finds that all her dining companions are expressing regret at ordering it and falls back to, “Well, I am enjoying it at any rate.”

A naïve realism has no difficulty with this: for the naïve realist, the objectifying claims purport to record the taste facts; and the relational claims describe characteristic responses by the speaker which may or may not indicate the obtaining of the relevant fact. But how is this pattern to be accounted for if not as by naïve realism? Relativism, too, can take the point in stride. For relativism, the objectifying claim, unlike (presumably) the corresponding subjective-relational reports, will be true, or not, as assessed in a particular context and so may match the latter in truth-value when originally asserted but cease to do so when assessed from a later standpoint when some material change in the parameters of assessment has taken place. However, contextualism has little option but to try to identify some more adventurous but still relational claim than the original subjective-relational report and make a case that it is generally this stronger claim that is put forward by one who speaks in the objectifying mode. A move in that direction, of course, immediately blocks the suggestion that in the autocentric-autocentric type of case, expressed in objectifying idiom, the antagonists are merely obliquely talking about their own individual affective states and thus “talking past” each other. It thus obviates any immediate need for manoeuvres with “semantic blindness”.²⁶ Indeed, to be fair to them, Cappelen and Hawthorne do dismiss any simple-minded version of contextualism that finds no difference in truth-conditions between “This sushi is delicious”, in the mouth of a speaker, S, and an utterance at the same time of “This Sushi tastes delicious to S”.²⁷ Still, it merits emphasis that, beyond

²⁶ One suspects, though, that in one way or another, contextualists of any sophistication will have to play the semantic-blindness card sooner or later: in general, presuppositional accounts may save the appearance of conflict in the superficial dynamics of an exchange but once it’s clear that the presupposition has failed, they have no choice but to say that the protagonists were talking past each other all along without realising it.

²⁷ In discussing the problem of ‘lost disagreement’ (pp.124-6) Cappelen and Hawthorne accuse the relativists of being “guilty of an all-too naïve understanding of how the predicate ‘spicy’ works [and thus of attacking] a simplistic version of contextualism that no contextualist worth his salt ought to be defending”. However, they do not say much about how contextualism about taste predicates should be understood. The only qualification they add is the following: “When one says something of the form ‘X is spicy’, one transcends the question of whether it is spicy to oneself, and the contextualist will recognize this. [...] When one uses ‘spicy’, one realizes that there are public standards on its application and realizes that, whether a meal tastes spicy to oneself does not

the provisional reference to “a group” featuring in the bare-bones rubric cited earlier, they offer nothing by way of a more definite, less simple-minded proposal. Indeed, the constructive part of Chapter 4 concludes on a very downbeat note about the prospects of saying anything much that is clear and definite (pp.120-1):

“A confession is in order, however. Suppose one emerges from one’s Pyrrhonian reflections with no powerful relativist axe to grind. Still, there is no easy recipe for the right contextualist semantics. The distinction between cases wherein one of two parties has a distorted verdict from cases where two parties speak past one another is vague and confusing. We do not pretend otherwise.”

The reader may understandably feel short-changed by this anti-climactic admission. Surely if contextualism does have the resources for an intellectually more satisfying response to the original problematic than naïve realism, expressivism or relativism can provide, we are owed a much more concrete indication of how a contextualist semantics for predicates of personal taste should run.

Let’s try to see how what Cappelen and Hawthorne offer might possibly be improved. It is natural to ask: what does an objectifying judgement—an *O-statement*—add to an associated subjective-relational (explicitly autocentric) report—an *S-R statement*? But let’s first ask a slightly less loaded question: what are the salient connections and contrasts in use between the two types of claim?

We have already noted two. First, S-R statements often provide a fall-back in cases where a corresponding O-statement emerges as inappropriate, or defeated. “This ride is terrific fun!” says John to his companions on the Coney Island *Cyclone* but then, noticing their frozen, grey-faced expressions, retreats to “Well, I am enjoying it, anyway.” More generally, S-R statements characteristically express an *assertibility-condition* for a corresponding O-statement: the O-statement may be asserted on the basis of one’s recognising in oneself an affect or response (an *S-R response*) that would verify the S-R statement. Simple contextualism explains this by identifying the two statements’ truth-conditions. But any such proposal bumps up against the fact that they generally diverge in their conditions of withdrawal or denial—their defeaters. A less simple contextualism that enlarges the relevant ‘group’ may perhaps accommodate the divergence. That will depend on, inter alia, the detail of the admissible defeaters, on which more in a minute. Note, though, that a familiar potential difficulty for group-style contextualist proposals opens at that point. If the truth-conditions for the O-statement involve the reactions of a group, that commits the assertion of it to a certain ambition: a speaker who bases that assertion on her own affect, or response as described in the corresponding S-R statement is then *asserting* that her reaction, or something relevantly similar, will be shared across the relevant group. That opens up a risk of irresponsibility if the speaker has given little thought to what might constitute the relevant group or is unclear about its membership or lacks reason to think that her reaction will be shared across it. We suggest, although the issue is again an empirical one, that ordinary speakers habitually do speak in the objectifying mode purely on the basis of their own reactions, without any clear intention about a relevant group or evidence that their reactions are typical. If that is true, it is a point against ‘sophisticated’ contextualism. We’ll come back to it in a moment.

The second point of contrast noted earlier is that O-statements often carry a normative payload (of the target’s *deserving* or *being suitable for*, etc., the relevant

settle the question” (124-5). But this, of course, does not help much in clarifying how the contextualist thesis should be properly understood. We are about to press this point in the main text.

subjective affect) which a corresponding S-R statement lacks. One can find things funny which additional information may cause one to reckon are not funny at all, and when that happens, the characteristic effect of the additional information is to call into question the fittingness of one's original response. One's natural sense of humour may also be overridden by moral considerations. Children have to learn not only that they shouldn't laugh at certain kinds of thing but also that they shouldn't find them funny in the first place.

Does e.g. "delicious" pattern with "funny" in that respect? It is a nice question. Information about how *pâté de foie gras* is produced may properly disincline one ever to eat it—even perhaps to campaign against the cruelty involved in its production. But it is not clear that it should tend to defeat the claim that it is delicious, or to show that one shouldn't find it delicious *if* one eats it. Mindful that different taste predicates may differ in subtle such respects, and making no claim to comprehensiveness, we can nevertheless propose a provisional taxonomy of potential defeaters for O-statements of taste that, crucially, are not also defeaters for corresponding S-R statements. It should include at least the following:

a) *Stability*: Lack of stability in one's subjective reactions across a relevantly similar range of cases may defeat an O-statement. More specifically, it may undermine the status of one's S-R response as warranting the assertion of the O-statement. Sometimes, let's suppose, you enjoy playing a not-too-serious game of Bridge and the "craic" over the cards; other times—it's not clear why—you cannot get involved and quickly get bored. Mindful of this, you can truly report, on an appropriate occasion, that "I am enjoying the cards tonight", but should not assert, "Bridge is fun."²⁸

b) *Community*: A substantial lack of agreement often functions as a defeater for an O-statement—recall John's reaction to the dismay of his companions on the rollercoaster, and Greta's to her dinner companions' reaction to the sushi.

c) *Robustness*: One's subjective response may be widely shared yet still defeated as a ground for an O-statement by relations of subordination among different kinds of values. The comic magician Tommy Cooper's slithering down the stage curtain during a trick got a laugh from most of the audience until they realised that it wasn't part of his act but signalled that he was unwell—actually, suffering a fatal heart attack. More generally, statements about what is funny, and also about what is fun, are defeasible by moral considerations about hurt and harm. Conversely, an O-statement of disgust prompted by, say, witnessing a birth may be defeated by considerations of its sheer biological normality and the value of the end product, a new human life brought into the world.

d) *Typicality*: Certain physical or psychological conditions—for instance, intake of laughing gas or alcohol, bipolar mental illness, residues of strong toothpaste or blue cheese in one's mouth, depression, or the side-effects on one's taste buds of recent chemotherapy—are standardly treated as dependable sources of distortion, inhibition, or exaggeration of a relevant range of S-R responses and consequently as disqualifying them as grounds for a normally associated type of O-statement.

Now, it is one thing to grant that considerations in these four categories are potential defeaters of O-statements in circumstances where a suitable S-R statement is true, i.e. that they disqualify the occurrence of an otherwise appropriate subjective response as a ground for the assertion. It is another thing to assume that they do so

²⁸ We here breach our self-imposed restriction (see n. 13 above) to avoid generic, or apparently generic, examples.

because they tend to override, or undermine, the status of that response as *evidence* for the obtaining of a state of affairs that would make the O-statement true. However if, like Cappelen and Hawthorne, we are approaching these matters in the spirit of Simplicity, it is hard to see how to make sense of these disparities in the respective uses of O-statements and S-R statements except by associating them with appropriately contrasting non-relativistic truth-conditions and postulating an appropriate evidential relationship between them. The required kind of truth-conditions for an O-statement will have to be such that each of the admitted kinds of defeater will spoil the evidence for their satisfaction that would otherwise be provided by an appropriate S-R response. And at this point, the move towards something not too distant from, though enlarging upon, the kind of contextualism at which Cappelen and Hawthorne casually gesture may seem inevitable. The O-statement will be a claim whose truth requires dependable (Stability) shared S-R responses of an appropriate kind across a contextually relevant group (Community) under normal circumstances (Typicality), and the evaluation it expresses must be resilient in the light of other, superordinate values of the group²⁹ (Robustness). There will accordingly be scope for contextual determination, in the light, presumably of the intentions of the speaker, both of the population of the group and of the range of circumstances wherein the relevant kind of S-R response is germane.

So, why be uncomfortable with a contextualist proposal along these lines? Two principal, related concerns are salient. One is the resultant rarefaction of the conditions for genuine disagreements expressed using O-statements. Greta and Elisabeth respond in their different ways to the sushi and go straight into what they take to be a disagreement, based just on their own reactions. But if the sketched contextualism is correct, the conditions for there to be a genuine incompatibility in their claims are quite demanding, involving overlap of their intentions about a number of matters to which they are very likely giving no thought. Competent speakers are not usually so casual about identifying themselves as in disagreement where context-sensitive language is involved. But the second concern, already noted earlier, is perhaps the more serious. It is that the ground for an O-statement provided by an appropriate S-R response, which ought to be canonical, now begins to look suspiciously *slight*. I laugh at a joke and say, "That's funny". But if the kind of contextualist account gestured at is correct, ought I not first to settle on a constituency for my remark, to get some evidence of the response to the joke among other members, to think about possibly off-colour moral ramifications of the jest, and so on?

Remember, however, that the drive to a contextualism on this broad model is driven by an assumption: that both the evidential connection and the disparities in use between O-statements and corresponding S-R statements need to be recovered from *the relations between their respective truth-conditions*, between the kinds of states of affairs that are apt to make them, respectively, true. This assumption is non-compulsory. We can, and should, drop the idea that assertoric content has to go hand in hand with truth-conditional content as implicitly interpreted by Simplicity. To be sure, assertoric content does go hand in hand with amenability to a disquotational truth predicate but it is a further step to take this to be content fit for the representation of real-worldly states of affairs. The discrepancies in the conditions of defeat of O-statements and S-R statements do not and, we contend, should not be taken as demanding explanation of the kind that the contextualism adumbrated above implicitly attempts.

²⁹ —or maybe: values which the group *ought* to have.

This is not the occasion to embark on a full development of the minimalist alternative. But in barest outline, the question to ask, we propose, is not: what kind of fact must O-statements be taken to describe if both their assertibility on the basis of an appropriate S-R response and their conditions of defeasibility adumbrated above are to be explained, but: what point would the institution of such assertions serve—why would it be worthwhile having a practice wherein such statements were treated as assertible on the basis of S-R responses but defeasible under the kinds of conditions reviewed? And here is where it helps to be mindful that in core cases of O-statements of personal taste, we are dealing with expressions of *value*: of things to cherish, pursue, discourage and avoid. Not all values are things that everybody cares about. Amoralism, ecological indifference and philistinism are, in varying degrees, not unusual. But values of personal taste are important to everybody. And we care because the S-R responses on which they are grounded are absolutely integral to our humanity and our engagement with life. A world in which we found nothing funny, or fun, or delicious, or exciting, or attractive, . . . , would be a world in which it was not worth living. And a world in which our lives were dominated by negative S-R responses—of disgust, distaste, boredom, blandness and ugliness—would be a living hell.

Focusing now on the positive cases, a reminder is apt of a range of mundane and contingent but very important facts about these responses. First, in a wide class of cases our enjoyment of values of taste, the intensity of the associated S-R responses, is characteristically enhanced by *sharing and socialisation*: the ride is more fun when others are with you and enjoying it too; we like to eat together; we—most of us, at least—prefer to go to the theatre with friends. Second, we do *naturally* share many of these responses. Third, they are also in many cases to a high degree *tractable*—one can acquire and refine patterns of response of these kinds by experience and education. Fourth, many of these responses have a *rich causal provenance* in their objects, which is receptive to study, technique and manufacture—to the arts of cuisine, comedy, dance and drama. Fifth, we do regard them as subject to conditions of *appropriateness* in the light of others of our social and personal values. All of these factors combine to create a situation where we have an interest in having an idiom that enables us, more than merely reporting a response we have, to *project* it as a possible point of co-ordination, something which may be shared and thereby enhanced, is dependable rather than ephemeral, something which is a reaction of our normal, healthy selves, and free of taints of spite, schadenfreude, cruelty or other morally reprehensible features, and whose causal prompts it may be worthwhile understanding with a view to developing an associated art.

We are not of course suggesting that ordinary speakers characteristically have such considerations in mind in making O-statements. Rather, even in this whistle-stop overview, the beginnings can be seen of how an account might run of the *social utility* of an objectifying idiom of taste which both assigns the importance it had better assign to grounding in personal responses and explains the broad range of defeaters we have noted without any need to reconceive the content of O-statements along contextualist lines or to query appearances of disagreement where ordinary speakers take it to occur. This minimalist approach shares with expressivism a rejection of the idea that in making such statements, we are normally in the business of trying to report the facts; but its expressivism is advanced as a thesis of pragmatics, not a claim about the semantics of the statements in question. And it agrees with relativism both in accepting that basic disagreements about taste are just that—disagreements focused on exactly the shared propositional content that they seem to concern—and in rejecting the idea

that in asserting or denying such a content, one purports to represent an objective fact; but this anti-realism is accomplished without any need for relativistic manoeuvrings with the truth predicate.

It has been, in our view, a major weakness not just of *Relativism and Monadic Truth* but of almost all the recent and contemporary writing about these issues that this minimalist, use-theoretic orientation has been invisible to most of the protagonists, relativist and anti-relativist alike. But its more detailed and positive development, as well as responses to objections, must await another opportunity.³⁰

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