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# On Value-Attributions: Semantics and Beyond

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## Abstract

This paper is driven by the idea that the contextualism-relativism debate regarding the semantics of value-attributions turns upon certain extra-semantic assumptions that are unwarranted. One is the assumption that the many-place predicate of truth, deployed by compositional semantics, cannot be directly appealed to in theorizing about people's assessments of truth value, but must be supplemented (if not replaced) by a different truth-predicate, obtained through certain "postsemantic" principles. Another is the assumption that semantics assigns to sentences not only truth values (as a function of various parameters, such as contexts, worlds and times), but also *semantic contents*, and that what context-sensitive expressions contribute to content are contextually determined elements. My first aim in this paper will be to show how the two assumptions have shaped two ways of understanding the debate between contextualism and relativism. My second aim will be to show that both assumptions belong outside semantics, and are moreover questionable.

## I Introduction.

### contextualism vs. relativism – a distinction without a difference?

In recent years, philosophy of language and semantics have witnessed a vibrant

debate between contextualist and relativist approaches to various areas of discourse; in particular, predicates of personal taste and, more generally, evaluative predicates and the languages of aesthetics and ethics. If the debate may appear to have reached an impasse, this may be because all the parties in the debate seem to presuppose certain principles regarding truth and content. The aim of my paper is to argue that the presupposed assumptions are unwarranted. There are two main assumptions, both of which may be traced back to David Kaplan's pioneering work on indexicals (1989). The first assumption concerns the definition of the truth predicate, and the second, the notion of semantic content. But before discussing those two assumptions, let me start from the question of what demarcates relativist semantic frameworks from contextualist ones. As we shall see shortly, there does not seem to be a unique answer to this question. What I would like to do in this introductory section is look at one way of interpreting the relativists' insights, as put forward in the proposals of Kölbel (2002) and Lasersohn (2005), regarding the so-called predicates of personal taste, such as 'tasty' and 'delicious'.

In those early relativist proposals, it has been held that predicates of personal taste require modifying our semantic framework and, in particular, introducing a novel parameter among the circumstances of evaluation, along with the parameters

of possible world and time. For our present purposes, we need not worry about the details of the arguments offered in those early proposals. Rather, let us look directly at the frameworks that were put forward as a result of those arguments. I will focus on the one given in Lasersohn (2005), which expands upon the framework of Kaplan (1989), the main novelty being that circumstances of evaluation are no longer world–time pairs, but world–time–judge triples.

Let us use double brackets to denote the semantic interpretation function and, for the sake of simplicity, let us put aside the parameter of a structure of interpretation (which specifies the universe, the sets of worlds and times and the relevant orderings among those, as well as the interpretation of the non–logical vocabulary). Then, if  $S$  is a sentence,  $c$  a context,  $w$  a world,  $t$  a time,  $j$  a "judge", and  $f$  an assignment of values to the variables, the basic format of semantic interpretation will look like this:

$$[[S]](c, w, t, j, f) \in \{\text{True}, \text{False}\}$$

In other words, what this "says" is that the semantic interpretation of sentence  $S$  gives you a mapping from sequences of the form  $(c, w, t, j, f)$  to truth values, hence that sentence  $S$  receives a truth value only with respect to a context, a world, a time,

a judge, and an assignment of values to the variables.

A central tenet of those early relativist proposals was the idea that introducing a judge parameter was a mandatory move, and that no alternative semantics could account for the semantic behavior of predicates of personal taste. In particular, the more traditional approaches, which would handle the dependence of truth value on a judge (and his or her taste) by means of an *implicit argument* associated with the predicate, were discarded as inadequate and as incapable of providing an accurate semantic analysis.

It is with that last claim that I took issue in my paper *Talking about Taste* (2007). There, I argued that from the point of view of semantics, relativist frameworks, understood as those that posit a judge parameter in the circumstances of evaluation, and contextualist frameworks, understood as those that treat predicates of personal taste (such as 'tasty') as involving an implicit argument for the "experiencer" or the person whose taste is at issue, hence analyzing what, at surface, is a one-place predicate, 'tasty(x)', as, really, a two-place predicate, 'tasty-to (x,y)', were not much more than notational variants.

My argument was based on a formal equivalence result, which it will be enough to summarize here. Let  $S_c$  and  $S_r$  be respectively sentences in the formal languages of

contextualist semantics (i.e. in which *prima facie* one-place predicates like 'tasty' are treated as two-place predicates, viz. 'tasty-to') and of relativist semantics (in which 'tasty' remains a one-place predicate, but its interpretation is a function not only of a world and a time, but of a judge as well). The result proceeds by a definition of a bi-directional translation procedure  $T$  between the two formal languages, for which the following holds. Let  $f_1, f_2$  be assignments of values to free variables, and let  $w$  be a world of evaluation and  $u$  a judge. Then:

- $S_i$  is true with respect to  $f_1, w$  and  $u$  iff  $T(S_i)$  is true with respect to  $f_1^T$  and  $w$ , where assignment  $f_1^T$  is defined in terms of  $f_1$  and  $u$ .
- $S_c$  is true with respect to  $f_2$  and  $w$  iff  $T(S_c)$  is true with respect to  $f_2, w$  and  $u^T$ , where  $u^T$  is a judge value obtained directly from  $f_2$ .

In other words, given a natural language sentence, its contextualist counterpart is predicted to be true for the same distribution of values to the various parameters, as its relativist counterpart. I have furthermore interpreted this equivalence result as suggesting that there is never going to be any properly semantic evidence to cut in favor of the one account over the other, given that no occurrence of a sentence containing a predicate of taste is going come out true in the one account and false in the other (provided, of course, that the value assigned to the implicit argument on a

contextualist analysis be the same as the value chosen for the judge parameter on a relativist analysis).

My results were targeted at the idea that a contextualist account of the variability in truth value associated with a given expression relies on there being an implicit argument associated with the expression, whereas a relativist account relies on there being a corresponding parameter in the circumstances of evaluation, along with the world (and the time) of evaluation. That this is at least one possible way of drawing a line of division between the more traditional contextualist frameworks and the more avant-garde relativist frameworks may be seen from this passage from Kölbel's *Introduction* to the volume *Relative Truth*:

"The focus of this book is whether there are novel truth-determining factors, such as standards of taste and states of knowledge, and how exactly such a determination relation should be construed. The two basic rival options are as follows. First, the view that the sentences in question merely exhibit a hitherto unnoticed contextual dependence analogous to indexicality (...) Secondly the view that the sentences in question express non-standard propositions that exhibit a relativity of truth analogous to that postulated, for example, by temporalists (...). I shall call views

of the second kind "relativist". Relativism is therefore the view that some propositions vary in their truth-value with some parameter(s) over and above the possible world parameter." (2008: 4)

However, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems more and more clear that this is not the *only* possible line of division. In the following three sections, I shall discuss another line of division, the one favored by such relativists as John MacFarlane. In the section V, I will address more specifically Lasersohn's reply to my equivalence results, and thereby consider yet another possible line of division.

## **II Assessment-sensitivity: from future contingents to value-attributions**

While the distinction discussed in the previous section remains relevant to the question of how to best account for variability in truth value, the idea that *that* is the contextualism-relativism distinction has been challenged. John MacFarlane (2009) holds that merely introducing some novel parameter among the circumstances of evaluation does not suffice to make a framework "relativist" (with respect to that parameter). In this section, I would like to go back to the source of MacFarlane's reluctance to view circumstance-dependence as a hallmark of relativism. It should



be noted that MacFarlane's original motivations for relativism were rooted in the problem of future contingency. Understanding MacFarlane's move in the case of future contingents will help us understand his motivations for introducing contexts of assessments, which are crucial to his account of value-attributions, too.

Consider a standard temporalist semantic framework, in which the truth value of a sentence is evaluated at a context, a world, and a time of evaluation, and where the usual temporal operators, such as "it was the case" or "it will be the case", are treated as sentential operators whose semantic clauses "shift" the time of evaluation. Thus e.g. 'Past S' is true at  $(c, w, t)$  iff there is some time  $t'$  earlier than  $t$  such that 'S' is true at  $(c, w, t')$ , where  $c$  is a context,  $w$  a world of evaluation, and  $t$  and  $t'$  are times.

Now, consider some future contingent statement, such as "There will be life on Mars". Assuming that the current state of universe leaves it open whether there will ever be life on Mars, the statement, as of now, is neither true nor false. But suppose that in ten million years, there gets to be life on Mars; then, once life on Mars has been brought about, the very same statement, evaluated retrospectively from that future standpoint, arguably ought to come out true.

These seem to be the two desiderata for views that endorse relativism about time-dependence and that allow for a statement that is neither true nor false to become

true in the future. However, a standard temporalist framework does not appear to be "relativist enough" to give satisfaction to both desiderata. It can either account for the idea that the statement lacks a truth value (e.g. taking a branching-time perspective and holding that a statement that gets realized on some branches but not on others is neither true nor false), or else, for the idea that the statement is true (e.g. taking a branching-time perspective but holding that among all the branches, there is some privileged one that corresponds to the actual future, the so-called Thin Red Line). Standard temporalist frameworks do not thus seem to be able, *as such*, to account for the idea that the statement under consideration is devoid of truth value as of now, but true as of the time that lies 10 million years ahead. In particular, the parameter of time of evaluation does not seem to be able to play the role that one might have thought it could play. For, let  $t_0$  stand for the present time (i.e. year 2012) and let  $t_{10M}$  stand for some time that lies 10 million years ahead. One might have thought that the statement "There will be life on Mars", as evaluated at  $t_0$ , is neither true nor false, but as evaluated at  $t_{10M}$  (after there has been life on Mars), true. But that won't work, because the future tense operator, on the analysis that has precisely motivated the temporalist treatment, shifts the time of evaluation: evaluated at  $t_{10M}$ , the statement is true iff "There is life on Mars" is true at some time *that lies in the future of  $t_{10M}$* . Yet, it

may well be the case that by then, there will have been life on Mars, but there no longer is nor will ever again be, thereby making the statement false when evaluated at  $t_{10M}$ , contrary to the initial desiderata.

MacFarlane's move in the case of future contingents was to introduce, along with the "old" context-parameter, a new context-parameter, calling the former "a context of *utterance*" and the latter, "a context of *assessment*". It is the former's job to specify the time that serves as a starting point for the future tense operator, and the latter's, to specify the time at which the statement is assessed for its truth value. Hence if a context of assessment takes place ten million years from now (i.e. at  $t_{10M}$ ), and there has been life on Mars in the meantime, then those "branches" at which there has never been nor will ever be life on Mars are no longer live possibilities, turning the statement from truth-valueless to true.<sup>1</sup>

We need not worry about the details of MacFarlane's proposal concerning future contingents, which raise issues of their own. What matters to the present discussion is that MacFarlane saw this proposal as applicable to value-attributions and other phenomena of the same ilk. MacFarlane's account of predicates of personal taste and,

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<sup>1</sup> This is a simplified presentation of the proposal in MacFarlane (2003). Note that in MacFarlane (2012), he has abandoned his earlier view and has opted for a non-temporalist framework, in which tenses get treated as quantifiers over times.

more generally, of value-judgments, endorses the sort of relativism that we saw in the introductory section, but then takes it one step further, by introducing contexts of assessment. My aim in the next section will be to see how this more elaborate version of relativism contextualism improves (if it does) upon contextualism.

### III A second stab at the contextualism–relativism divide.

#### adicity–diminishing definitions of the truth predicate

Consider a framework for the semantics of predicates of taste that is just like the framework that, in sect. I, we called "relativist". The assignment of interpretations, and in particular, of truth values to sentences, will be done, as usual, with respect to a structure of interpretation (which, for simplicity, we shall again set aside), and an assignment of values to the free variables  $f$ , as well as with respect to a context  $c$  and to circumstances of evaluation, whose parameters include a world  $w$ , a time  $t$ , a judge  $j$ .<sup>2</sup> Thus the interpretation of any given predicate  $P$  will be not only a function of a world and a time, but of a judge as well – though, of course, there are many

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<sup>2</sup> MacFarlane (2012) uses a "gustatory standards" parameter, rather than of a judge parameter. However, the exact choice of the nature of the parameter used – be it individuals, groups, judges (*qua* individuals endowed with a certain taste), gustatory standards, or directly *tastes*, turns out to be orthogonal to the issue that occupies us here.

predicates whose interpretation will remain constant in the judge parameter.

The important point is that the predicate of truth that we end up with is not a monadic but, rather, a many-place predicate. Things are not true *simpliciter*. Rather, sentences are true with respect to a context, a world, a time, a judge, an assignment of values to the variables, and so on. Thus, once again, the basic format of semantic interpretation will be as follows:

$$[[S]](c, w, t, j, f) \in \{\text{True}, \text{False}\}$$

This basic format of truth-parametrization will be shared by the "contextualist" as well as the "relativist" approaches, as they are about to be defined. However, as we are going to see, the difference between the two approaches (or families thereof) will not show up in semantics, i.e. the machinery that maps, in a compositional manner, the sentences of a language to truth values (as a function of appropriate parameters). Rather, it will show up in what MacFarlane (2003, 2012) calls "postsemantics".

Before we pin down the distinction that, in MacFarlane's view, is the one that distinguishes contextualism from relativism, let us observe that there are various ways in which, *qua* theorists, we may toy with the notion of truth that transpires out

of the basic semantic format. For instance, instead of taking the truth value of a sentence to depend on all those parameters that I have listed above, we could (setting once again the structure of interpretation aside) say that it only depends on two parameters: a context and a circumstance of evaluation. But then, what we would do is construe circumstances as sequences consisting of a world, a time, a judge, and an assignment of values to the variables. Or we could go even further and say that the truth value of a sentence depends on a single parameter, a "point of evaluation", but then construe such "points" as sequences consisting of a context plus all the parameters that had been previously subsumed under a "circumstance of evaluation".

Another option would be to say that truth values are not assigned to sentences but to sentence-context pairs, and analogously, that semantic interpretation applies not to sentences but to sentences-in-context.

$$[[S, c]] (w, t, j, f) \in \{\text{True}, \text{False}\}.$$

Last but not least (and this will bring us back to our main issue) we may attempt a non-trivial principle that would relate the many-place predicate of truth to a two-

place predicate, one that applies to sentences relative to contexts, thus eliminating dependence on the circumstances of evaluation. This "adicity-diminishing" definition of truth may be obtained from the basic semantic format as follows:

$$[[S]](c) = \text{True}^* \text{ iff}_{\text{def}} \text{ for all assignments } f, [[S]](c, w^c, t^c, j^c, f) = \text{True},$$

where  $S$  is a sentence,  $c$  a context, and where  $w^c$ ,  $t^c$  and  $j^c$  are respectively the world, the time and the judge of the context  $c$  (or somehow directly supplied by  $c$ ).

This corresponds to the definition that David Kaplan provides for sentence-truth-in-context.<sup>3</sup> I will speak of principles such as this one as "adicity-diminishing", since their main purpose is to reduce the adicity (i.e. the number of argument-slots) of the truth predicate, from many-place to two-place, applying to sentences and contexts.<sup>4</sup>

It is this principle that MacFarlane seems to see as a trademark of contextualism.

In MacFarlane's terminology, an "indexical-contextualist" approach to a given class

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3 I shall be using "True\*" to denote the predicate of truth derived from the semantic predicate of truth. As for the principle, see Kaplan (1989): 547; of course, he does not have a judge parameter in his semantics. In Predelli and Stojanovic (2008), we called the principle "the Classic Reduction".

4 The same sort of principle is sometimes referred to as "diagonalization", echoing a similar move in the work of Stalnaker (1998). Note that, ultimately, one might aim at supplementing this principle with yet another adicity-diminishing principle, in order to reduce "True" to a monadic predicate, applying (arguably) to utterances. Kaplan does that by speaking of "sentence-occurrences" being true, where a sentence occurrence is basically identified with a sentence-context pair.

of evaluative expressions treats them as indexicals in disguise (or as containing a "hidden indexical"), while a "nonindexical-contextualist" approach posits a suitable parameter in the circumstances of evaluation, but crucially, both types of approach would endorse the appropriate adicity-diminishing principle (for each and every parameter in the circumstances of evaluation). By contrast, MacFarlane's view still endorses that very same principle for the world parameter, as well as for the time parameter,<sup>5</sup> but, crucially, not for the judge parameter. Instead, MacFarlane's formal machinery is going to deploy the context of assessment-parameter. This parameter is only put at work when it comes to defining sentence truth. Sharing the spirit of the previous adicity-diminishing principle, MacFarlane offers the following one:

$[[S]](c_U, c_A) = \text{True}$  iff for all assignments  $f$ ,

$[[S]](c_U, w^{c_U}, t^{c_U}, j^{c_A}, f) = \text{True}$ ,

where  $w^{c_U}$  and  $t^{c_U}$  are the world and the time of  $c_U$  (the context of utterance), but  $j^{c_A}$  is the judge of  $c_A$  (the context of assessment).<sup>6</sup> This, too, is an adicity-diminishing

5 As noted, MacFarlane moves back and forth between a temporalist and an eternalist treatment of time. In (2012): Ch. VII, where he discusses matters of taste, he is using a time parameter.

6 Here is MacFarlane's definition: "A sentence  $S$  is true as used at context  $c_U$  and assessed from a context  $c_A$  iff for all assignments,  $[[S]]^c_U(w_{c_U}, t_{c_U}, g_{c_A}) = \text{True}$ , where  $w_{c_U}$  is the world of  $c_U$ ,  $t_{c_U}$  is



principle. The difference, however, is that before one can proceed to eliminate certain argument-places in the basic semantic format for the truth predicate, one first needs to introduce a context of assessment. Once this new parameter is available, one can deploy it in one's adicity-diminishing principle, thus eliminating any further dependence on the judge parameter (as well as on any other parameters that similarly track assessment-sensitivity).

#### **IV The many-place predicate of truth, and the bridging principles**

The contextualism-relativism distinction that we are now considering operates, then, at a "postsemantic" level, to use MacFarlane's terminology. The newly introduced parameter of a context of assessment remains idle in the semantic machinery, as it does not appear (or, at least, does not play any role) in any of the semantic clauses of any expression (or, for that matter, any other linguistic constructions). *Ipsa facto*, it stays out of the entire process of compositional computation of truth *conditions*, and only shows up at the point at which one inquires about the sentence's truth *value*.

Now, MacFarlane's own tacit acknowledgment that the relativist "semantics" that

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the time of  $c_U$ , and  $gc_A$  is the gustatory standard ("taste") of the agent of  $c_A$  (that is, the assessor's taste at the time of  $c_A$ ) (MacFarlane 2012: 175).

he is offering may be distinguished from contextualist semantics only at the level of postsemantics, already grants my repeatedly made point that from the viewpoint of semantics, contextualism and relativism are not much more than notational variants. However, one might object that merely calling some principle "postsemantic" does not render it irrelevant to properly semantic considerations. So let me devote this section to the question of it may seem desirable to posit such adicity-diminishing postsemantic principles. The following observation by Max Kölbel reaches to the heart of the matter:

It will turn out that semantic theories for natural languages define a three-place truth-predicate applicable to sentences, and that some extra-semantic principles are needed in order to relate this semantic truth-predicate to truth in any pre-theoretic sense.  
(2008: 5)

As we have seen, the semantic truth-predicate is not just a three-place predicate, but, on most construals, a many-place predicate. Be that as it may, the important point is that something needs to be said regarding the question of how the truth-predicate deployed in semantics relates to the notion of truth that, rather than being

a technical tool of a theory, is what the theory aims (inter alia) to account for. Let us call principles that, in general, articulate the relationship between those different notions of truth, "bridging principles". What those principles are, and whether they can be stated in a way that is not going to be question-begging, is an important and difficult question. The quest for such principles is what, I think, underscores the motivations for adicity-diminishing principles, be they contextualist or relativist.

While it is beyond controversy that something, at some point, needs to be said on how semantic truth relates to truth *tout court*, so to speak, I would like to make two points. The first is that, however such bridging principles might go, they are going to be extra-semantic principles. This reinforces my claim that the contextualism-relativism debate does not bear on semantics proper, but rather, falls somewhere beyond. My second point, albeit somewhat underdeveloped at this stage, is that the adicity-diminishing principles, relativist as well as contextualist, are questionable, and had better be dispensed with. Of course, to fully vindicate this point, I should have been able to provide an answer to the question of how semantic truth relates to other notions of truth – a question that I couldn't possibly hope to answer within the span of this paper. Instead, what I shall do is how that there are reasons to doubt the well-foundedness of such extra-semantic principles, Kaplan's and MacFarlane's

alike.

First things first, let me start with Kaplan's motivations. Kaplan's idea that the correct notion of sentence-truth-in-context is that of the sentence being true with respect to the context at stake *and at the circumstances determined by that very context* is one of those ideas that have been taken on board by Kaplan's followers without being questioned at all. However, once we look at this idea with some scrutiny, it becomes unclear what solid motivations could support it. Places at which Kaplan discusses the idea are scarce; here is one:

Since the content of an occurrence of a sentence containing indexicals depends on the context, the notion of *truth* must be relativized to a context. If *c* is a context, then an occurrence of  $\phi$  in *c* is true iff the content expressed by  $\phi$  in this context is true when evaluated with respect to the circumstances of the context. (...) If you try out the notion of truth on a few examples, you will see that it is correct. If I now utter a sentence, I will have uttered a truth just in case *what I said*, the content, is true in *these* circumstances.  
(Kaplan 1989: 522-3)

The motivations that Kaplan offers here are shaky. The suggestion that we "try out

the notion of truth on a few examples" shows that the endorsement of the related adicity-diminishing principle relies heavily on intuitions. What is more, Kaplan is appealing to the notions of 'what is said' and of 'content' that, as we shall see soon, are equally shaky and intuition-driven.

All in all, Kaplan's adicity-diminishing principle, which reduces the many-place predicate of sentence truth (true with respect to a context, a world, a time, etc.) to the two-place predicate (true with respect to a context) has been introduced into the formal framework, and has become part of the Kaplanian heritage, without any solid arguments or evidence that would show it to be a correct principle.<sup>7</sup>

To drive the point home, let me now state the theoretical options that appear to be available to us. All of the options will share the same underlying *semantic* notion of truth, but will differ as to the question of how that notion relates to various other

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of truth obtained through the adicity-diminishing principle has also been used in the definition of *logical* notions, such as that of *validity*. In Kaplan's formal logic of indexicals, sentence *S* is valid iff for all structures and assignments, and *for every context c*, *S* is true in *c* (i.e. true when evaluated with respect to *c*, *w<sup>c</sup>* and *t<sup>c</sup>*). A motivation for (and, at the same time, a consequence of) this definition was that the truth expressed by an utterance of the sentence "I am here now" would come out as a truth of logic. Kaplan considered the sentence at stake as "deeply, and somehow universally true" (1989: 509) and held that "one need only understand [its] meaning to know that it cannot be uttered falsely" (*ibid.*). The example of "I am here now" has generated a considerable literature, although most of it has focused on the question whether that particular case is or isn't a truth of logic, without reaching all the way down to the source of the problem. My own take on the question has been to argue that the very notion of validity, rooted in the adicity-diminishing definition of sentence truth, is what we ought to revise (cf. Stojanovic 2012).

notions of truth, including the intuitive notion of truth. The first two options, already discussed, share the idea that there must be some non-trivial adicity-diminishing principle in order to bridge the gap between semantics and the rest, but diverge on the question of what that principle should be. Insofar as judge-dependence, and value-attributions more generally, are concerned, we have the following divide:

*(CPS) "Contextualist" postsemantics:*

$[[S]](c) = \text{True}^*$  iff for all assignments  $f$ ,  $[[S]](c, w^c, t^c, j^c, f) = \text{True}$ ;

*(RPS) "Relativist" postsemantics:*

$[[S]](c_U, c_A) = \text{True}^*$  iff for all assignments  $f$ ,  $[[S]](c_U, w^{c_U}, t^{c_U}, j^{c_A}, f) = \text{True}$ .

But there is yet another option, which is the one that I favor. The option at stake will simply abstain from positing any adicity-diminishing principle at all. To see better what such an option would amount to, let us consider a concrete case of a value-attribution. Imagine that, in reference to a certain song, a person – call her Alma – says "This is a great song!", and that, in accordance to her standards, Alma values the the song at stake as great indeed. What will be the truth value of Alma's

utterance? Contextualism answers, "true". Relativism answers, "true if the song at stake falls out as a great song on the assessor's standards, false otherwise". Thus if another person – call him Bruce – is assessing Alma's utterance for a truth value, and Bruce doesn't value the song at stake as great at all, then the utterance is false.

Now, the approach that I favor will answer that there is no principled, context-independent way of answering the question in advance. Let Bruce be the person who is assessing Alma's utterance for a truth value. Nevertheless, depending on various pragmatics factors that may come into play in the context in which this assessment is taking place, it may be that the standards with respect to which the song's greatness is to be evaluated are Alma's standards, or it may be that they are Bruce's standards, or that they are some standards generally accepted in a given community, or some standards prescribed by some salient authority, and so on. The gist of the approach that I favor is to hold that the choice of a specific set of standards, or more generally, the choice of values of the parameters of evaluation at which a given sentence, as used in a given context, is to be evaluated for a truth value, is not driven by any rigid extra-semantic principles, such as CPS or RPS; rather, it is pragmatically driven. Let me thus call this type of approach, "pragmatic". Pragmatic approaches, in sum, will rely on the very same compositional semantics as contextualism and relativism (as

currently construed); however, unlike these, they will not postulate any adicity-diminishing postsemantic principles. They will only rely on a single truth predicate, the many place predicate of truth that one can read off from the basic semantic format. When it comes to the question of how the notion of truth deployed in the semantics relates to other notions of truth, such as the intuitive notion of truth that underlies our talk about truth (as when we ask whether a given utterance is true, or whether someone was speaking truth on a given occasion), pragmatic approaches, as their name suggest, will relay the question to pragmatics.

Let me end this section by comparing the three approaches – contextualist, relativist, and pragmatic – with respect to the range of predictions that they make, or, as the case may be, allow for. It takes little to see that the three approaches may be inter-ranked in terms of their flexibility regarding predictions of truth value. RPS is more flexible than CPS, since it allows as a special case that  $c_A$  (i.e. the context of assessment) be identical to  $c_U$  (i.e. the context of utterance). In other words, every prediction of a truth value (for a given sentence, as used in a given context) that can be generated within CPS, can also be generated within RPS, but not vice versa.

The pragmatic approach, in turn, is at least as flexible as RPS (and, by transitivity, more than CPS), given that every sequence of the relevant evaluation parameters, i.e.



every (world, time, judge)-sequence, that may be supplied by  $c_U$  and  $c_A$  jointly,<sup>8</sup> may be obviously directly supplied as such. Conversely, it may be argued that *in most cases* RPS is less flexible than the pragmatic approach; however, the details of that argument will depend on the specific case under consideration. Thus, if we are only considering judgments of taste, in isolation from other value-attributions and other "assessment-sensitive" expressions (e.g. knowledge attributions or epistemic modals), the context of assessment's only purpose is to supply a value for the judge parameter, and RPS will not be more restrictive than the pragmatic approach. On the other hand, consider a natural extension of the relativist framework to other types of assessment-sensitivity, resulting in a series of other parameters in the circumstances of evaluation,  $s_1, s_2 \dots s_n$ . We will then get:

*(ERPS) Extended relativist postsemantics:*

[[S]] ( $c_U, c_A$ ) = True\* iff for all assignments  $f$ ,

$$[[S]] (c_U, w^{cu}, t^{cu}, j^{ca}, s_1^{ca}, s_2^{ca} \dots s_n^{ca}, f) = \text{True}.$$

Whether (ERPS) is more restrictive than the pragmatic approach will crucially

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<sup>8</sup> Remember that the world and the time being are supplied by  $c_U$ , and the judge, by  $c_A$ .

depend on how exactly the contexts of assessments are understood and modeled. If for every possible combination of values for the parameters that get determined by the context of assessment, there is a corresponding "context of assessment", then it will have the required flexibility to cover the range of predictions that the pragmatic approach allows for; otherwise it won't.

## **V It's all about Content**

So far, we have seen two ways of describing the contextualism-relativism divide. The first one was concerned with the semantic (and, to some extent, syntactic) analysis of the variability in truth value that judgments of taste and attributions of value exhibit; the second one was concerned with "postsemantics" and the definition(s) of the truth predicate(s). I have argued that in both cases, the divide has been overestimated, and that relativism, whether semantic or postsemantic, is not extraordinarily innovative. In the previous section, we also saw that Kaplan's followers took on as part of the whole "package deal" certain assumptions, like the adicity-diminishing principle concerning the truth predicate; assumptions that, as I argued, are unwarranted and poorly motivated.<sup>9</sup> Another such unwarranted piece of the Kaplanian heritage is the

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<sup>9</sup> The metaphor of a package deal comes from Lewis (1980), who famously wrote: "I see Stalnaker

notion of *content*, which Kaplan further identified with *what is said*. Here is a typical passage:

The content of an expression is always taken *with respect to* a given context of use. Thus when I say "I was insulted yesterday" a specific content – *what is said* – is expressed. Your utterance of the same sentence, or mine on another day, would not express the same content. (Kaplan 1979: 83)

Even though the notion of content, and specifically the equation "content = *what is said*", were not met with unanimous approval (even among Kaplan's followers), it is surprising to see what a central place considerations about what is said occupy in the ongoing contextualism–relativism debate. One frequently finds contextualism described (by relativists) as a certain view regarding an expression's contribution to 'what is said', as may be seen from these the following passages:

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and Kaplan as putting forth package deals" (p. 42). Lewis further writes: "Part of each package is a preference, which I oppose as unwarranted and arbitrary, for variable but simple semantic values" (ibid.), where by the latter he means contextually determined semantic contents. In this respect, some of the points that I am about to make, to the effect that the Kaplanian notion of content is unwarranted, was already there in Lewis' discussion, to which I owe a lot.

"The contextualist takes the subjectivity of a discourse to consist in the fact that it is covertly about the speaker (or a larger group picked out by the speaker's context and intentions). Thus, in saying that apples are "delicious", the speaker says, in effect, that apples taste good to her (or to those in her group)." (MacFarlane 2007)

"On this view, 'It's wrong to cheat' involves ellipsis, or a place holder indicating a set of standards, a code, whatever. What [its] use says depends on what has been elided or what is being assigned to the place holder." (Richard 2008)

Both MacFarlane and Richard, in describing the rival contextualist views, place a lot of weight on the idea that contextualism is a view about what the speaker *says*.

In fairness to MacFarlane and Richard, it may be acknowledged that *in certain debates*, 'contextualist' views *are* views about what is said.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it is also true that, in arguing against contextualism, some of the relativists' arguments seem to rest on equivocation. For, relativism has been put forward as an alternative to the more traditional *semantic* frameworks, and the latter were argued to be incapable of

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<sup>10</sup> That would be, for instance, if not the most accurate then at least not an inaccurate description of contextualism in the sense of Recanati (2004). As for the different meanings that the term 'contextualism' receives in the different debates, see the discussion in Stojanovic (2008b).

allowing for a correct treatment of predicates of taste, value-attributions, and so on. But contextualism, if understood as a view about the structure and the properties of a given semantic framework, is obviously *not* a view about 'what is said'. The formal framework of Kaplan (1989), as such, is one in which, to be sure, one can *define* a notion of 'content' (or 'what is said') the way Kaplan does, but *not* one of which such a notion is constitutive. The notion of content comes over and above the semantic framework itself. It is therefore perfectly consistent to endorse "contextualist" formal semantics, such as that in Kaplan (1989) or, for that matter, any double-indexed semantics, without being "contextualist" in the sense of taking the contextually supplied elements to contribute to *what is said*.<sup>11</sup>

A similar misconception concerns the notion of 'content' (even when the latter is not identified with 'what is said'). Thus, for instance, in reply to the equivalence results from (Stojanovic 2007), rehearsed here in section I, Lasersohn wrote:

But really, this proof establishes intertranslatability only in a relatively broad sense. This becomes apparent as soon as one notices that Stojanovic nowhere gives an explicit definition of

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<sup>11</sup> Ninan (2010) forcefully makes a related point, by showing that the notion of content that may be put to use in providing a compositional semantics for intensional operators cannot be identified with the notion of content that may be put to use in an account of assertion.

semantic content, or an explanation of how content relates to context. If, following Kaplan, we assume that the values of pronouns are fixed as part of the assignment of contents to expressions in context [...] the translation function will not respect sameness and difference of semantic content. [...] Showing that two sentences have the same distribution of truth values across a set of models or indices does not show that they are equivalent in content, if the mapping from indices to truth values proceeds Kaplan-style in two steps, and content is defined with reference to the level between the steps. Since the debate between relativism and contextualism turns partly on the issue of which parameters get fixed in which step, we cannot ignore this issue in comparing the two approaches. I conclude that the use of non-standard indices is not semantically equivalent to the use of implicit pronoun arguments without such indices. (2008: 319-20)

If the Kaplanian notion of content should turn out to be a semantic notion, and if the debate between relativism and contextualism should indeed (even if only partly) be a debate about what goes into the content and what doesn't, then Lasersohn's conclusion would be justified. However, the antecedents in both conditionals heavily rely on a notion that is far from being uncontroversial. Or, to be more precise,

insofar as the notion of content is a technical notion, defining 'contents' as mappings from circumstances of evaluation (or 'indices') to truth values, the notion *is* clear enough. But then, in order for the debate to make sense, we would need to be able to compare and evaluate the different approaches by relating the technical notion of 'content' to some empirically testable predictions. Yet that final, crucial step remains as unclear as ever.

## VI Conclusion.

### **contextualism vs. relativism – a barren debate?**

The overall discussion in this paper has been more critical than constructive. I started by rehearsing the results that show the contextualist "implicit argument" approaches to be equivalent (when suitably construed) to the "relativist" approaches *à la* Lasersohn and Kölbel, which posit a novel parameter in the circumstances of evaluation in order to handle variations in truth value associated with predicates of personal taste and, more generally, with value-attributions. However, we have seen that the situation is more complicated, to the extent that there is no consensus as to what the divide between contextualism and relativism precisely amounts to. That has led me to look at another construal of the divide, the one that has emerged from the

work of John MacFarlane. On that construal, the relevant question is that of deciding how to fix the values of the appropriate parameters to which truth – or, at least, the notion of truth with which semantics operates – is relative. On that construal, contextualism is the view that the context of utterance fixes those values, while relativism holds that the context of assessment does that job. My own take on this choice has been to reject the very idea that we ought to choose. I have argued that both options rest on extra-semantic principles for which not enough motivation has been provided.

To be sure, the observation, made by Kölbel and others, that there had better be some way of relating the semantic many-place predicate of truth to the notion(s) of truth that are relevant to other philosophical enterprises, such as giving an account of assertion, knowledge, and the like, remains a valid observation. Nevertheless, my point is that the adicity-diminishing principles proposed by contextualists and relativists alike are not sufficient to bridge the gap. First, we could see that Kaplan's motivations for the principle boiled down to the idea that if we "try out the notion of truth on a few examples, [we'd] see that it is correct". But precisely, judgments of taste, value-attributions, and other phenomena of their ilk, shed serious doubt on the correctness of the principle. Second, although MacFarlane's amendment may present



some improvement over the old principle, it, too, falls short of bridging the gap between semantics and the other areas mentioned (assertion, belief, knowledge, etc.); witness the fact that when it comes to applying the resulting notion of relative truth to those other areas, one can see MacFarlane go through immense struggle to bridge the remaining gap (cf. e.g. MacFarlane (2005) and (2012, Ch. 5)).

My own suggestion, albeit programmatic, is that it might be best not to stipulate any adicity-diminishing principles at all. Of course, if such a view is to be seen as a rival to the views that endorse some adicity-diminishing principle or other, be it contextualist or relativist, I would need to flesh out in greater detail how semantics would connect with an account of assertion, belief, etc., without transiting through "postsemantics". Let me leave that as a prospect for future research. For the time being, I hope to have achieved the more modest goal of showing that our semantic machinery, and the corresponding notion of truth, do not by themselves require that there be any further adicity-diminishing principles. Hence, if the contextualism-relativism divide is shaped upon the choice between Kaplanian vs. MacFarlanian postsemantics, then it may well turn out to be a barren debate, should it turn out that, as I contend, no specific adicity-diminishing principles are required.

Finally, in the last section, I have considered the contextualism-relativism divide

as shaped upon the choice of what one puts into what is said, and/or into semantic content, and what one decides to leave out. Once again, if my proposal is to be taken as a competitor, I would need to say more on how semantics connects with assertion and other areas in which the notion of content has been put to use. Note, though, that in this respect, none among the existing relativist proposals, to my knowledge, has attempted to provide a full-fledged account of 'what is said'. Conversely, I have made attempts elsewhere to spell out the main tenets of an alternative account of semantic content, which rejects the Kaplanian assumption that indexicals (and, for that matter, other context-sensitive expressions) contribute contextually determined elements to content/what is said (Stojanovic (2008a), (2009)). For present purposes, the important point, already anticipated in Lewis (1980), is that such assumptions about content and 'what is said' do not come from the semantics itself, but must be superposed over it. Hence, once again, if contextualism is to be distinguished from relativism in terms of such extra-semantic assumptions, it may well turn out to be a barren debate, given that the underlying assumptions about what is said and content that are presupposed in the debate are already highly questionable.

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