Contextualism and Disagreement

(1st draft, please do not cite; comments welcome)

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The paper is concerned with one aspect of the recent debate between contextualism and relativism about a series of discourses, such as predicates of personal taste, knowledge attributions, epistemic modals, etc. – namely, the issue of disagreement. One major objection that relativists have raised for contextualist treatments of the domains enumerated is that it cannot satisfactorily explain the intuition of disagreement we have in exchanges like the following:

A: Avocado is tasty.
B: No, it is not. It’s horrible.

As I see it, the dispute so far has gone through two stages. Stage one consists in the appearance of relativist doctrines that claimed that contextualism cannot make sense of disagreement, as it is revealed in the intuitions we have about exchanges like the one above. To be more precise, the allegation has been that contextualism cannot make sense of “faultless disagreement”, a phenomenon thought by some authors (e.g., Wright (1992) and Kölbel (2003)) to be present in subjective areas of discourse, such as moral discourse, aesthetic discourse, humour and so on (basically, the evaluative sphere). The phenomenon is vindicated by the strong intuition we have with respect to exchanges like the one above that the participants disagree with each other, but at the same time that neither of them is at fault in saying what they say. Contextualism, at least in its simplest forms – it is claimed – gets right the faultlessness part of the phenomenon, but it fails to capture the disagreement part. For, rendering the proposition expressed by each participant in the exchange as containing the subject for which avocado is tasty or not (thus, the proposition expressed by A’s utterance being is that avocado is tasty for A, whereas the proposition expressed by B’s utterance being that avocado is not tasty for B), the propositions expressed by the participants in the exchange are not contradictory, and thus no disagreement arises.⁠¹ Thus, critics of contextualism such as

¹ Disagreement is a tricky issue, and much more needs to be said about it than I could say in this paper. However, I take it to be fairly uncontroversial that one necessary (although probably not sufficient) condition for two people to disagree is for them to entertain (not necessarily to express) contradictory propositions.
Kölbel (2004), Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2005) have concluded that contextualism cannot account for faultless disagreement because it cannot account for the intuition of disagreement we have in such cases. In what follows, I am going to refer to this problem for contextualism with the phrase “the disagreement problem”.

The second stage of the debate I’m considering consists in the contextualist answers to the disagreement problem. One way to answer, which I won’t consider in this paper, has been to deny the data – that is, to deny that the intuition of disagreement is present in exchanges like the one above. Intuitions are a delicate issue, but for the purposes of this paper I will take it that the intuition of disagreement in cases like the one above is strong enough to constitute the starting point for an objection. This move is also mandated by the fact that some contextualists do accept that the intuition is present. Thus, a second way to answer the disagreement problem has been to argue that, while agreeing that the intuition exists, contextualism does have the resources to account for disagreement, despite relativists’ allegations, or that the intuition can be explained away. It is the goal of this paper to have a close look on those responses and argue that contextualists that take this second route have either (a) disregarded the real problem, giving answers that miss the target or (b) their response involves postulating, in some form or another, semantic blindness on the part of the speakers. (I take having to postulate semantic blindness to be an undesirable feature of a semantic view.) In the second case, this extra theoretical cost is not always made explicit.

Related to (a), the usual contextualist answer has been to present cases in which the intuition of disagreement is born out, even under the assumption that contextualism is true. The strategy has been to point out that there are uses of predicates of personal taste in which the predicate is used exocentrically (when one speaks from a different person’s perspective), or group uses (when the predicate is used to speak about what a certain group finds the case). The answer typically comes in the form of a list of such cases; textual evidence for such lists can be found in Glanzberg (2007), Stojanovic (2007), Lopez de Sa (2008), Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009). Here is an example of such a list, taken from the latter work. In the case of an exchange between a speaker uttering “That will be fun” and an interlocutor uttering “That will not be fun” (“that” referring to the same thing), the following cases are possible:

(i) The speaker is using “fun” autocentrically, the hearer realizes this, but exocentrically points out that the relevant event will not be fun for the original speaker.

(ii) The speaker is claiming that the referent of “that” will be fun for a group that includes the interlocutor. While it will be fun for the speaker, it will not be fun
for certain other members of the group. Here the interlocutor is quite within his rights to correct the speaker. Once corrected, the speaker will in that case not stick to his guns unless he feels the alleged counterevidence is faulty.

(iii) The original speaker was in fact merely expressing the claim concerning the referent of “that” that it will be fun for him. The interlocutor misunderstands the speaker and corrects him when it is not appropriate to do so. (Cappelen and Hawthorne, 2009: 110-111).

However, this kind of answer misses the relativist challenge. For, it is not enough to point out that there are some cases in which the intuition of disagreement is born out, assuming contextualism is true; it is in some specific cases in which the relativist claims the intuition is present – cases that are not on the contextualist’s list. Here are two such cases, which the relativist takes to be crucial:

(iv) The original speaker is using “fun” autocentrically and the hearer also uses “fun” autocentrically (even if he realizes that the original speaker uses “fun” autocentrically);

(v) The speaker is claiming that the referent of “that” will be fun for a group that does not include the interlocutor. The interlocutor, in her turn, is claiming that the referent of “that” will be fun for a group that does not include the original speaker.

On the contextualist view, these cases remain unaccounted for. While it might be true that in the initial formulations of the disagreement problem exocentric and group uses of predicates of personal taste have been overlooked, it is cases like (iv) and (v) that constitute the thrust of the relativist challenge. Given that relativism can also account for the cases on the contextualist’s list (there is nothing in relativism precluding a principled treatment of exocentric, or group uses of the relevant expressions), it should be preferred to contextualism. Of course, as a last resort, the contextualist could deny that the intuition of disagreement is present in specific cases like (iv) and (v), but then it is not very clear whether contextualism is supported by intuitions or the other way around.

The main point of the considerations above was to highlight the fact that the contextualist answer to the disagreement problem considered above is, at best, incomplete. This creates the need from the contextualist part to say something more about cases like (iv) and (v). Now, one way contextualist could answer the problem would be to explain away the
intuition of disagreement by embracing *semantic blindness*. This has been the preferred solution of some contextualists (featuring prominently in Keith DeRose’s defense of epistemic contextualism). However, in recent contextualist answers to the disagreement problem this solution is not always mentioned – or, if mentioned, it is not given the weight it deserves. In the absence of other claims about cases like (iv) and (v) (as seems to be the case in Glanzberg (2007)), this silence simply means that an answer is still needed. Some authors, though, do mention semantic blindness as a solution. Thus, Cappelen and Hawthorne, in connection to a semantics of “hot”, which they take as a model for a semantics of predicates of personal taste, admit that after all the contextualist will have to retort to “a dose of semantic blindness” (Cappelen and Hawthorne, 2009: 118). But this, it seems to me, is not an innocent concession. Having to posit semantic blindness was found by many philosophers, famously starting with Schiffer (1996), to be quite an unattractive feature of any semantic view. One major advantage that contextualists claim their view has over relativism is that the contextualist view does not incur any additional theoretic costs. But if it turns out, as Cappelen and Hawthorne themselves acknowledge, that contextualists needs to posit semantic blindness, this advantage seems to vanish. When it comes to comparing contextualism and relativism, it is all too fair to put all the cards on the table, and this includes admitting that the contextualist has to posit semantic blindness – or, at least, to give a complete answer to the disagreement problem.

On simple versions of contextualism, semantic blindness is related to a lack of knowledge on the speakers’ part with respect to the workings of their own language. However, there are other, more sophisticated versions of contextualism in which semantic blindness takes different forms. In the remainder of the paper I illustrate this point by having a look at Dan Lopez de Sa’s (2007, 2008) version of contextualism.

In Lopez de Sa’s presuppositional view, the contextualist has the means to account for disagreement in exchanges such as the one presented above because disagreement is possible only under the presupposition that there is a common standard of taste that the participants in the exchange share. This presupposition is triggered simply by the use of predicates of personal taste. If this presupposition is not fulfilled, Lopez de Sa claims, nothing propositional has been expressed by any of the participants, and hence there is no disagreement to be accounted for.2

One might question the details of Lopez de Sa’s view, but the point I want to make here is that the presuppositional view also leads to the postulation of a kind of semantic

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2 At least if we think of disagreement, as I do here, as involving entertaining contradictory propositions.
blindness. If on the simple versions of contextualism semantic blindness is connected with
speakers’ use of expressions of a language, on Lopez de Sa’s view semantic blindness is,
obviously enough, related to the presuppositions triggered by the use of such expressions.
Since, on his view, predicates of personal taste function like presupposition triggers, it
follows that the intuition of disagreement stems from sheer ignorance about the
presuppositions triggered by certain expressions. I take this result to be implausible. The
following exchanges between an ordinary person and a Lopez de Sa-style contextualist seem
perfectly natural to me:

A: The cat is on the mat.
B: So, you presuppose that there is exactly one cat and exactly one mat around.
A: Yes, I do. That’s why I used “the”.

A: Avocado is tasty.
B: So, you presuppose we share a standard of taste.
A: No, I don’t. I actually know you cannot stand avocado. Why did you ask that?

[Also to be possibly considered: von Fintel & Gillies’s indeterminacy of context view for
certain uses of epitemic modals; Hawthorne’s projection solution to explaining away data
about knowledge attributions (insofar as this strategy can be used in the case of the
disagreement problem); Schafer’s new paper on predicates of personal taste and epistemic
modals.]

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