

Contextualism and Disagreement about Taste

One of the vivid debates within contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics is that between *contextualism* and *relativism* about a series of expressions such as predicates of personal taste, epistemic modals, “know”, moral terms, etc. At the center of this debate has been the phenomenon of “faultless disagreement”, which has been used to argue in favor of relativism and against contextualism. In this paper I will investigate certain recent contextualist answers to the problem raised by “faultless disagreement” (namely, that contextualists cannot account for the intuition of disagreement ordinary people seem to have in certain situations) and argue that they face a dilemma: either they leave out some cases usually judged as disagreement, or they incur additional theoretical costs by postulating hypotheses such as semantic blindness.

I will thus start, in section I, with clarifying the sense in which the labels “contextualism” and “relativism” will be used in this paper. In section II I will succinctly present the argument from “faultless disagreement” and lay down a particular notion of disagreement that has been often presupposed in the debate between the two positions. Section III provides an overview of the debate, taking as a representative example predicates of personal taste, with the aim of setting the ground for the discussion to come. After presenting the dilemma, in the next section I expand on the first of its horns: namely, that the recent contextualist answers to the problem of “faultless disagreement” considered ignore certain cases that, in my opinion, are central to the relativist objection, and thus that the answer is incomplete. Section V expands the second horn of the dilemma: namely, that the strategy contextualists have pursued when confronted with such cases (namely, appeal to semantic blindness) incurs additional theoretical costs that are not always properly assessed, and thus that their position in the debate I’m concerned with is not as solid as they assume. I will close with a short summary and with stating the conclusions of the paper.

I Contextualism vs. Relativism: defining the notions

The labels “contextualism” and “relativism” have each been used to refer to more than one position; it is thus important to clarify right from the outset what exactly is meant by them. To get a better handle on the way I will use these terms, I will presuppose the

familiar Kaplanian picture of semantics, according to which the assignment of a truth value to an utterance is done in two stages. At stage one, the utterance is assigned a content, by the resolution of indexicals and other context-sensitive expressions in the context of utterance; at stage two, that content is evaluated with respect to the circumstance of evaluation of the context of utterance. Thus, in Kaplan's (1989) view, context plays a double role. On one hand, it provides elements that get into the content of utterances: call this, following John MacFarlane (2009), the *content-determinative* role of context. On the other hand, context provides elements in the circumstances of evaluation with respect to which utterances are to be evaluated: call this, again following MacFarlane (2009) the *circumstance-determinative* role of context. Now, although context has this double role, when it comes to one specific factor that has a bearing on the truth-value of a certain utterance, context can actively play only one of these two roles. This idea, accepted by many semanticists, is nicely captured by the following principle:

Distribution: The determinants of truth-value distribute over the two basic components truth-evaluation involves: content and circumstance. That is, a determinant of truth-value (...) is either given as an ingredient of content or as an aspect of the circumstance of evaluation. (Recanati, 2007: 34).

The Kaplanian picture and the Distribution principle allow me to state clearly how I will use the terms in question. Thus, I will call "contextualism about a certain type of expression" any view according to which, in connection to a certain truth-value determining factor associated with the type of expression in question, context has a content-determinative role, and "relativism about a certain type of expression" any view according to which, in connection to a certain truth-value determining factor associated with the type of expression in question, context has a circumstance-determinative role. I'm aware that by doing so I am lumping together very different positions under a single label; however, this will not have any bearing on the issues raised in this paper.¹

¹ Thus, under "contextualism", as I defined the term, one will find views as different as Stanley's (2000) and Recanati's (2002). On the other hand, under "relativism" one will find both more moderate views such as Kölbel's (2004) or Recanati's (2007) and more radical views such as MacFarlane's (2003, 2005, forthcoming) and Lasersohn's (2005).

II Disagreement

In this section I will focus on a phenomenon that has been invoked by many proponents of relativism as the main motivation for the view, namely the phenomenon of “faultless disagreement”. Cases of faultless disagreement are cases in which, although there is a perceived disagreement between two parties entertaining contradictory contents (or an intuition to that effect), none of them is at fault neither cognitively nor in any other way. To use the example of predicates of personal taste, the phenomenon consists in the fact that when confronted with exchanges like the following:

- (1) A: Avocado is tasty.
B: No, it's not. It's horrible,

ordinary people have the tendency to interpret A and B both as having a disagreement (signaled by the expression “No” at the beginning of B’s line) and as being faultless (see, e.g., Wright (1992) and Kölbel (2003) for more about this phenomenon). Alternatively, relativists claim that when faced with situations like (1), ordinary people have the *intuition* that A and B disagree.

Following our intuitions in order to philosophically illuminate a certain topic has never been a bullet-proof method, so one needs to be very cautious here. One problem with relying unconditionally on intuitions in cases like the one above is that it is not clear, for example, whether those intuitions will lead to a single and coherent notion of disagreement. Disagreement seems to be a very subtle and volatile notion, and philosophers studying it have been keen to stress this feature. In the same vein, one could claim the same about faultlessness: is there a single sense of faultlessness that surfaces when people judge the cases above as cases of faultless disagreement or do those intuitions track different notions? In what follows I will leave aside the issue of faultlessness and concentrate exclusively on the notion of disagreement.

What is then disagreement? I propose here to follow the methodology adopted by MacFarlane (ms). That is, instead of trying to isolate one notion of disagreement that will stand for all the cases of “real disagreement”, MacFarlane lays out a number of notions, each of which capturing one legitimate sense of what people take disagreement to be. The claim is thus that all these notions are useful in characterizing some but not all the cases judged as disagreement. I will not go through all the notions of disagreement that MacFarlane distinguishes, but I will instead focus on one such notion,

which seems to me to have played an important role in the debate I'm concerned with here. To this end, let me start with a particular definition of faultless disagreement, and work my way from there towards the issues having to do with disagreement only. In his paper "Faultless Disagreement", Kölbel proposes the following definition of the phenomenon:

A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker *A*, a thinker *B*, and a proposition (content of judgement) *p*, such that:

- (a) *A* believes (judges) that *p* and *B* believes (judges) that not-*p*.
- (b) Neither *A* nor *B* has made a mistake (is at fault). (Kölbel, 2003: 53–4)

Now, it seems that the notion of disagreement that Kölbel has in mind in this definition (clause (a)) corresponds to a notion of disagreement that could be defined as follows:

Simple Disagreement: Two people disagree if they entertain contradictory contents.²

It is this notion of disagreement that I will assume in this paper. This notion seems to me to be quite intuitive and minimal, but I'm aware that some philosophers might find the assumption of entertaining contradictory contents as a (minimal) condition for disagreement unrealistic and the condition too strong. I acknowledge the fact that there are contextualists who reject this notion of disagreement.³ It is not my aim here, however, to insist that such a notion is nevertheless the right one. As I said, I'm sympathetic to MacFarlane's attitude to the effect that there is more than one notion of disagreement that captures "real disagreement" and that each such notion might be suitable for some, and not all, cases of what people judge as disagreement. But note that adopting this pluralist attitude in itself gives us one reason in favor of using a notion of disagreement that requires as a minimal condition contradictory contents: there might just be cases in which such a notion is perfectly appropriate, and the minimal condition fulfilled. A second, more dialectically relevant reason in favor of using such a notion is

² The notion of disagreement thus defined would correspond to what MacFarlane (ms) calls "doxastic non-cotenability". MacFarlane's pluralist attitude towards disagreement in this paper differs from his earlier one exposed in MacFarlane (2007), which has a more monist flavor.

³ See especially Huvenes (forthcoming) for making the case that ordinary discourse reveals other notions of disagreement and that the contextualist need not embrace the definition given in **Simple Disagreement**.

that it has been employed by some contextualists themselves: witness, for example, the recent contextualist view in Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009). So, assuming disagreement to be defined as in **Simple Disagreement** is not unreasonable, especially given that it will be those contextualists that I will engage with in what follows.

Now, what I want to show in what follows is that contextualists who claim that they can account for disagreement while adhering to this notion have to face a dilemma: either they leave some cases of disagreement unaccounted for, and thus their answer is incomplete, or they incur some additional theoretical costs that are not always made explicit by appealing to hypotheses such as semantic blindness. So, the idea is, even if such a notion of disagreement is not the only possible one, contextualists employing it have troubles making good on the promise to account for disagreement without endangering their position.

III Contextualism vs. Relativism: the dialectic

Let me begin with telling a story about the dispute between contextualism and relativism about predicates of personal taste. As I see it, the dispute so far has gone through two stages. Stage one consists in the appearance of relativist doctrines claiming that rival views cannot account for cases of faultless disagreement. Data like the exchange between A and B in (1) above has been taken to form the basis of an argument in favor of relativism and against contextualism for predicates of personal taste. The argument has been that, since contextualism treats utterances such as those of A and B in (1) as making the judges be part of the content of those utterances (so that the content of A's utterance will actually be that avocado is tasty for A, or for some other relevant person or group, depending on the version of contextualism at stake, and the content of B's utterance will be that avocado is not tasty for B, or for some other relevant person or group), although it does get the faultlessness part of the phenomenon right, it fails to capture the disagreement part. Thus, critics of contextualism such as Kölbel (2004), Lasersohn (2005), MacFarlane (2005) have concluded that contextualism cannot account for faultless disagreement, thus leaving a crucial feature of predicates of personal taste unaccounted for. Since the contextualists' failure consists in not being able to account for the disagreement part of the phenomenon, I will refer to the problem with the phrase "the disagreement problem", leaving aside the faultlessness aspect of the problem.

The second stage of the dispute I'm considering consists in the contextualist reaction to relativists' allegations and has been materialized in a series of answers to the disagreement problem. One could distinguish three different strategies to answer this problem in recent contextualist literature. Thus, some authors simply go on and deny the data, claiming that the intuition of disagreement is absent in exchanges like the one between A and B above. As I noted in the beginning of this section, intuitions are a delicate issue, and certainly much needs to be said about when and in which conditions they could be trusted, 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. Other authors have rejected the relativist argument on the basis of using a too narrow notion of disagreement. As we have seen above, disagreement is a multifaceted notion, and the relativist's focus on disagreement as involving contradictory contents (or, indeed, content at all) amounts to overlooking other senses of disagreement, which when taken on board would not support the relativist argument. But, on the other hand, there are contextualists that accept both something like the relativist notion of disagreement and that the intuition of disagreement is present in cases like the one above. Among them, some just bite the bullet, claiming that contextualism simply cannot make sense of faultless disagreement, but assuage the worry by usually accompanying this sort of claim with the postulation of some form of semantic blindness, to the effect that the semantics of such expressions is hidden to normal speakers and, as a consequence, they are systematically wrong in judging as being the case what is not – for example, judging that there is disagreement in the exchange between A and B above when in fact there is none. So, according to those contextualists, the intuition of disagreement one has in alleged cases of faultless disagreement is to be explained away, rather than accounted for. But there are also contextualists that try to fix the problem by addressing it head-on: they claim and purport to show that, despite the relativist allegations, contextualism can after all make room for disagreement.

It is the third kind of response, in both its forms, that I want to address in what follows. This is a debate that has its amount of intricacy, and I will not enter it deep enough here; my goal is only to have a closer look on this third type of response and argue that contextualists that take this 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, thus incurring additional theoretical costs.⁴

IV Ignoring the relevant cases

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)⁵, 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

⁴ There has been a strong reaction to the idea that relativism itself has a good answer to the problem of disagreement. Montminy (2009), for example, questions MacFarlane's brand of relativism's capacity to account for disagreement about knowledge attributions as ordinarily perceived. For complaints that relativism in general cannot account for disagreement, see, among others, Iacona (2008), Rosencrantz (2008). Of course, such complaints presuppose a certain notion of disagreement different from that assumed here, and a monist take on the issue. What I take to be true, however, is that if disagreement is defined as in **Simple Disagreement**, then those criticisms miss their targets. For a view denying that relativism cannot account for disagreement even under the assumption that disagreement requires entertaining contradictory contents, see Sundell (forthcoming).

⁵ For the distinction between autocentric and exocentric uses of predicates of personal taste, see Lasersohn and Stephenson (2007).

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, as I understand it. 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 I take to be crucial for the relativist’s case against contextualism (assuming the same set up as before: an exchange between a speaker uttering “That will be fun” and an interlocutor uttering “That will not be fun”, with “that” referring to the same thing):

- (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. Assuming that relativism can account both for cases like (iv) and (v) *and* 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.

V Semantic blindness

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, I have noted above that one way contextualist answered the problem was to explain away the intuition of disagreement by embracing *semantic blindness*. Semantic blindness involves the attribution, by the theorist, in a systematic and large-scale way, of ignorance of how some expressions in a language work to otherwise competent speakers of that language. This has been the preferred solution of some traditional contextualists (featuring prominently in Keith DeRose's defense of epistemic contextualism – see, for example, DeRose (2006)). 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), 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, write:

[T]he contextualist will explain the relevant datum by appeal to a dose of semantic blindness (...) [O]wing to misjudgments about semantic uniformity, some disagreement judgements are accepted when they ought not be. (Cappelen & Hawthorne, 2009: 118)

Also, Schaffer writes in a recent paper:

There remains a sense in which the contextualist could still claim to deliver the appearance of faultless disagreement (...) [T]o do so she will need to posit a certain sort of performance error concerning indeterminacy in covert arguments, which I will call *semantic fogginess*. Semantic fogginess involves the very specific sort of error of blurring over different possible values of covert arguments in cases of indeterminacy. (Schaffer, forthcoming)

It is comforting to see that appeal to semantic blindness (or similar notions) is acknowledged, but it seems to me that this is far from being an innocent concession on the contextualists part. Having to posit semantic blindness was found by many philosophers, perhaps most prominently by Schiffer (1996), to be quite an unattractive

feature of any semantic view.⁶ One major advantage that contextualists claim their view has over relativism is that the contextualist view does not incur any additional theoretic costs. Relativism is often thought as unnecessarily complicating the semantic machinery by adding new parameters to the circumstances and as committing themselves to unsupported claims about, for example, assertion (e. g., MacFarlane (2007)). But if it turns out, as the authors above themselves acknowledge, that contextualists need to posit semantic blindness, this advantage is not on as strong a footing as contextualists would like. Of course, things will need to be weighted carefully and a final assessment will have to be sensible to more aspects of this debate. However, the following fact remains: the contextualists envisaged either don't have a complete answer to the disagreement problem, by not addressing cases like (iv) and (v) or their response involves postulating, in some form or another, semantic blindness on the part of the speakers, thus incurring additional theoretical costs.⁷

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. Let me illustrate this point by considering Lopez de Sa's (2007, 2008) (also defended in Kölbel (2007)) 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 between A and B 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.⁸

One might question the details of Lopez de Sa's view and its adequacy with respect to what is normally judged as cases of disagreement⁹, but the point I want to make here is that the presuppositional view also leads to the postulation of a kind of semantic blindness. If on the simple versions of contextualism semantic blindness is

⁶ Here is a more recent expression of this attitude: "Obviously, we do not wish to posit semantic blindness when we don't have to. Other things being equal, a semantic theory that didn't claim semantic blindness on the part of competent speakers would be a better theory." (Hawthorne, 2004: 109).

⁷ See also Almér and Westerståhl (2010) and Baker (forthcoming) for making the point that adopting semantic blindness is not an innocent concession on the contextualist part.

⁸ At least if we think of disagreement, as I do here, as involving entertaining contradictory contents.

⁹ See Baker (forthcoming) for a strong case against Lopez de Sa's version of contextualism.

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 uses of certain expressions. This result strikes me as quite implausible. The following exchanges between an ordinary person (A) and a Lopez de Sa-style contextualist (B) seem perfectly natural to me:

- (2) 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".
- (3) 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?¹⁰

VI Summary and conclusions

In this paper I considered certain recent contextualist answers to the "faultless disagreement" challenge. After clearing up the senses in which the labels "contextualism" and "relativism" will be used (section I), I summarily presented the phenomenon of "faultless disagreement" and singled out one particular notion of disagreement presupposed by the parties in the debate (section II). In section III I then laid out the dialectic of the debate, making clear how the phenomenon of "faultless disagreement" has been used to argue in favor of relativism and against contextualism – using the case of predicates of personal taste for illustration. I then proceeded by arguing that the recent contextualist answers to the challenge lead to a dilemma: either they leave out some crucial cases perceived as disagreement and are thus incomplete (section IV) or in answering those cases they appeal to the hypothesis of semantic blindness, which brings an additional theoretical cost, therefore making it harder for the contextualists to claim advantage in the dispute (section V). This conclusion is limited,

¹⁰ I'm assuming here that A's use of "tasty" in both (2) and (3) is autocentric.

in the sense that it applies only to views that adopt the notion of disagreement put forward in section II, and which grant that in exchanges such as (1) the intuition of disagreement is present. However, even in its limited application, the conclusion points out that certain versions of contextualism don't succeed so easily in answering the "faultless disagreement" challenge as their proponents sometimes present themselves to do. Contextualists of the kind considered here should better revise their answer.

Dan Zeman

University of Barcelona
dan_zeman@yahoo.com

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