Definite Descriptions and Semantic Pluralism
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Abstract: We pose two arguments for the view that sentences containing definite descriptions semantically express multiple propositions: a general proposition as Russell suggested, and a singular proposition featuring the individual who uniquely satisfies the description at the world-time of utterance. One argument mirrors David Kaplan's arguments that indexicals express singular propositions through a context-sensitive character. The second argument mirrors Kent Bach's and Stephen Neale's arguments for pluralist views about terms putatively triggering conventional implicatures, appositive, and nonrestrictive relative clauses. After presenting these arguments, we show that rival explanations (appeals to implicature, referential use, presupposition, etc.) do not offer equally compelling explanations of the data, and defend the methodology employed in the arguments against some criticisms.

The semantic content of definite descriptions has been a long-standing topic for debate in contemporary philosophy of language. Russellians hold that sentences featuring definite descriptions express general propositions, while others invoke Keith Donnellan's (1966) referential/attributive distinction to argue that those sentences sometimes express singular propositions. We will offer two arguments for a 'semantic pluralist' account according to which typical utterances of [The F is G] semantically express *two* propositions: the familiar general proposition suggested by the Russellian analysis, and a singular proposition.

As noted, the claim that [The F] can function referentially is certainly not new; many have taken Donnellan's distinction between attributive and referential uses to show that some uses of definite descriptions are directly referential. But it is highly controversial whether Donnellan's arguments are relevant to the *semantics* of definite descriptions.[1] The

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1 See for instance Kripke (1977).

arguments presented here will sidestep that controversy by arguing for pluralism without any appeal to the considerations that motivated Donnellan to posit referential uses. We will argue that sentences featuring definite descriptions (in extensional contexts)[2] [typically][3] express singular propositions, but the arguments will not suppose that the speaker *intends* to use a definite description referentially, nor that the audience *interprets* the speaker to have such an intent.

The first argument for pluralism we will consider has two prongs. The first prong, presented in Section 1, argues that our reasons for thinking that indexicals express singular propositions suggest that definite descriptions also express singular propositions. However, we will observe a disanalogy between indexicals and definite descriptions: a certain test elicits unequivocal intuitions that indexicals express singular propositions, while in the case of definite descriptions our intuitions are ambivalent. The second prong, presented in Section 3, observes that this ambivalence motivates semantic pluralism. These two prongs together constitute an argument that sentences containing definite descriptions express multiple propositions, where one of these contents is a singular proposition. The second argument for pluralism, offered in Section 5, appeals to indirect reports. Subsequent sections anticipate and respond to potential objections to these two arguments.

1. Ambivalence and the Modal Profile Test
There are two candidate meanings (in some sense) of the word 'I' relative to a context of utterance in which Obama is speaking:

  (1)   the speaker of the utterance

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2 The restriction to extensional contexts is not required; ultimately, the account outlined here can be applied to sentences featuring definite descriptions in intensional contexts as well. But both propositional attitude and modal contexts raise complications that we cannot hope to address in a reasonable amount of space, so the present focus will be limited to the more simple case of unembedded definite descriptions.

3 As we will see in Section 2, exceptions will be made for unsatisfied descriptions and descriptions that are satisfied non-uniquely.

(2)   Obama

David Kaplan (1989a) argues that (2) is the semantic content of 'I' relative to that context of utterance; on his view, sentences containing indexicals express singular propositions. However, while (1) is not the semantic content expressed by 'I', there is a sense in which it does capture the meaning of the indexical. In Kaplan's framework, (1) captures the 'character' of 'I', the rule that tells us how to find the referent. We can think of (1) thus as capturing the 'reference-determiner' of 'I': x is the extension of an utterance of 'I' in context C iff x is the speaker at C.[4]

Kaplan uses a 'modal profile' test to argue that (2), not (1), is the semantic content of the indexical. The test proceeds as follows: consider a world-time α in which Alice is happy and utters

(3)   I am happy.

Now consider a second world-time β, in which Billy is speaking and is happy, but Alice is neither speaking nor happy. Consider what Alice said in uttering (3) at α, and ask whether it is true *of world-time β*. Our intuitions suggest that Alice has *not* said something true of world β; although the person speaking at β (Billy) is happy at β, the relevant fact is that Alice is not happy at β. The modal profile test thus helps us to identify the content expressed by (3) relative to the context of utterance at α. In asking whether *what was said* is true at some other world, we come to recognize what proposition was expressed, distinguishing it from other closely related propositions. The modal profile test helps us to see that Billy's happiness at β is not relevant in asking whether Alice said something true at β, and hence the proposition expressed by (3) is the singular proposition featuring Alice rather than the general proposition generated by a Russellian analysis of 'the speaker of the utterance is happy'.[5]

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4 Thanks to an anonymous referee for help in tightening this formulation.
5 Kaplan's modal profile test provides strong evidence that indexicals are rigid

Let us now apply the modal profile test to definite descriptions; suppose Alice utters:

(4)   The CEO of Microsoft is a ninny

Suppose further that Alice does not know the CEO (Steve Ballmer), and that she could neither correctly name him nor pick him out of a lineup; she utters (4) because she believes that CEOs of successful companies are

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designators. But the test does not show that indexicals are directly referential as opposed to rigidly descriptive; 'I' might express *the unique speaker at world-time α*, for instance. Kaplan (1989b: 577) concedes this point in discussing the rigidity of proper names. Why then does Kaplan claim that indexicals are directly referential? Kaplan (*Ibid.*) states that in (1989a) he had not yet recognized the distinction, but he suggests that the case for direct reference can be made.

Salmon (1981: 35-40) argues that directly referential terms are rigid in a different way than are rigidified descriptions: a directly referential term is 'obstinately' rigid, which is to say that the term designates the same individual at *all* worlds, including worlds at which that individual does not exist. A rigidified description, on the other hand, is 'persistently' rigid, which is to say that it designates the same individual at all worlds at which s/he exists, but fails to designate anything at worlds at which that individual does not exist.

Kaplan (1989b: 577-578) offers a second argument that names are directly referential rather than rigidified descriptions. He notes that many ordinary speakers cannot articulate the reference-fixing conditions for names, and infers that the reference-fixing conditions cannot be part of the semantic content. That is, since ordinary speakers cannot identify the value of 'F' in 'the actual F' that would designate Aristotle in all worlds, the name 'Aristotle' cannot be equivalent to any rigidified description of the form [the actual F]. Kaplan suggests this point may generalize to pure indexicals as well—competent speakers may not know the characters of their terms.

I doubt that these arguments successfully discredit the hypothesis that indexicals are rigidly descriptive. Regarding the first argument, in Murday (2013) I argue that both directly referential terms and rigidified descriptions are persistently rigid, and hence that we cannot use the obstinacy/persistence distinction to discriminate between the two types of terms. The second argument seems to presuppose that the semantic content of a term is epistemically transparent to competent speakers, but this principle is dubious even to those who share Kaplan's anti-descriptivist intuitions: a content externalist may well say that the semantic content of 'water' is H_2O whether or not the speaker recognizes that the term designates substances with *that* microstructure.

Where does that leave us? Identifying a better way to discriminate between directly referential and rigidly descriptive terms is a project that we cannot address further here. For present purposes, I will suppose that indexicals are directly referential, but the reader is free to read Kaplan as showing merely the weaker claim that indexicals are not equivalent to non-rigid descriptions. [Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting expansion on this point.]

commonly ninnies. Now imagine a world β with the following facts:

Steve Ballmer is neither the CEO of Microsoft nor is he a ninny.

Bill Gates is the CEO of Microsoft and he is a ninny.

To apply the modal profile test, ask whether Alice has said something true of world β. When evaluating (3) at β, Kaplan argued that our intuitions tell us unequivocally that (3) expresses a singular proposition about Alice, not a general proposition about whomever is speaking at β. When evaluating (4), however, our intuitions pull in both directions in asking whether Alice has said something true of world β. The CEO of Microsoft at β is a ninny, but Ballmer is not a ninny at β. Pluralism explains our ambivalent intuitions—Alice's utterance of (4) expresses two propositions, and at world β one is true and the other false.[6]

The pluralist view of definite descriptions resembles Kaplan's account of indexicals in the following way: there is a non-rigid meaning of each term which, when supplemented with facts about the world of utterance, generates a rigid singular content. In both cases, the modal profile test shows that the term in question does not express merely a descriptive content. However, the test also reveals a difference between indexicals and definite descriptions: sentences containing indexicals express *only* singular propositions, but sentences featuring definite descriptions express *multiple* propositions, one singular and one general, where the singular proposition features the individual who satisfies the description

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6 Pluralism is not the thesis that (4) expresses a *conjunction* of two contents. If (4) expressed a conjunction of a general and a singular proposition, then to ask whether Alice said something true of world β would be to ask whether (*Exactly one thing at β is a CEO of Microsoft, and that thing is a ninny) & (Steve Ballmer is a ninny at β*) is true. That conjunction is false, so the conjunctivist view would not explain our ambivalent intuitions. Pluralism fares better, since it predicts that (4) expresses a truth but also expresses a falsehood. [See Bach (1999: 353) on this difference between pluralism and conjunctivism, though he is not concerned with descriptions.]

For similar reasons, the modal profile test suggests that pluralism has an advantage over an ambiguity view according to which some occurrences of [the F is G] express general propositions while others express singular propositions; we will revisit this point in Section 6.

at the world-time of utterance.[7]

2. Clarifying the Pluralist View of Definite Descriptions

We can see the need for a more nuanced statement of the pluralist view once we consider a pair of cases: unsatisfied descriptions (instances of [the F] where no individual whatsoever exemplifies F-ness), and 'non-uniquely satisfied descriptions' (instances of [the F is G] where multiple individuals exemplify F-ness). We will consider case each in turn.

Where the description is unsatisfied, [the F is G] does not express a singular proposition. This does not impugn the pluralist view of [the F]; the pluralist view holds that definite descriptions provide a recipe for generating singular propositions; the meaning provides instructions for generating a singular proposition as a function of facts about the world-time of utterance. In the case of unsatisfied descriptions, those facts fail to supply the necessary ingredients for generating such a proposition.[8]

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7 Do we really have good reason to think that the second proposition expressed by [the F is G] is a singular proposition? Perhaps instead 'The CEO of Microsoft' expresses two contents, one that is non-rigidly descriptive and the other rigidly descriptive. As we observed in note 5 above, the modal profile test cannot distinguish between these two pluralist views: the test distinguishes between rigid and non-rigid contents, but not between directly referential and rigidified descriptivist contents. Following note 5, we will set this aside here; until we have a conclusive test for differentiating between directly referential and rigidly descriptive terms, we cannot take the extra step of showing that the second content is referential. I will continue to suppose that the first pluralist view is preferable, following the orthodoxy that indexicals express singular propositions, but if the reader is convinced only of the weaker claim that *one* of these two pluralist views is correct, this paper will have accomplished its goals.

8 The pluralist could treat unsatisfied descriptions in a different way. Perhaps when [the F] is unsatisfied, [the F is G] expresses a singular proposition in addition to a general proposition, but that the singular proposition is degenerate in the following sense: it has the structure of a singular proposition, but no constituent corresponding to a referent of [the F]. The choice between the two options mirrors the choice that a direct reference theorist faces in considering an utterance of 'you' in which no interlocutor is present. Suppose, for instance, a blindfolded speaker thinks that someone else is in the room and says 'you should untie me'; has the speaker expressed a degenerate singular proposition, or failed to express a singular proposition? I will suppose here that no singular proposition has been expressed, and similarly that no singular proposition is expressed by non-uniquely satisfied descriptions, but a rigorous consideration of the alternatives must wait for another time.

In this respect, definite descriptions generate singular propositions in a way that resembles 'tomorrow' more than 'now': every utterance of 'now' directly refers to a time, but some utterances of 'tomorrow' may not, if time will come to an end.

Where the description is non-uniquely satisfied, the pluralist will ask how we want to formulate the general proposition that is expressed. One alternative is to say that whenever there is more than one individual who is F, [the F is G] expresses a false general proposition. If we embrace this alternative, the pluralist will treat non-uniquely satisfied descriptions just like unsatisfied descriptions. Another alternative is to say that [the F is G] can express a true general proposition, perhaps because of ellipsis or implicit domain restriction. If it expresses a true general proposition, the pluralist will hold that a singular proposition is also expressed; whatever mechanism is posited to explain the truth of the general proposition can be invoked as well to explain how a singular proposition is expressed. For present purposes, we can set aside the question whether the general proposition expressed by [the F is G] is true or false. The pluralist will allow others to settle that question; once settled, her view about whether a singular proposition will fall out naturally.

3. Precedent for Positing Pluralism

The pluralist view of definite descriptions is easier to countenance if one is already open to the idea that a sentence *can* express multiple propositions. Happily, there is precedent for positing pluralistic views about semantic content to explain the sort of ambivalence we witnessed when applying the modal profile test in Section 1.

Kent Bach (1999: 351)[9] argues that there are two propositions expressed by

(5)   Ann's computer, which she bought in 1992, crashes frequently.

One proposition is that Ann's computer crashes frequently; the other is

9 Bach (*Ibid*.) and Neale (1999) argue that pluralism should be invoked to explain other linguistic phenomena as well.

that she bought it in 1992. Bach argues (1999: 353) that the 'which'-clause surely contributes to the proposition expressed by (5), but that (5) does not express the conjunction of the two propositions. Suppose the 'which'-clause is false, but that Ann's computer does crash frequently. If (5) expressed a conjunction, then we would have to say that it is false in these circumstances. But intuitively the falsehood of the 'which'-clause is not enough to make (5) false. Bach (1999: 345-347) suggests instead that (5) expresses two propositions, and that one of these propositions is more important than the other. When the more important proposition is true and the less important proposition is false, we will say 'true' if forced to choose between 'true' and 'false', but such a choice is somewhat forced.[10] The suggestion thus seems to be that we feel some pull in both directions, though the diminished importance of the proposition expressed by the 'which'-clause relative to the other proposition makes for a stronger pull towards the verdict 'true'.

Bach, along with Stephen Neale (1999), also applies this approach to one category of alleged conventional implicatures, those triggered by expressions such as 'but' or 'still'. For instance, he suggests that

(6)   Cal is still on the phone

expresses two propositions: that Cal *has been* on the phone and that Cal *is* on the phone. Similarly,

(7)   Shaq is huge but agile

expresses two propositions: that Shaq is both huge and agile, and that there is some sort of contrasting relationship between being huge and being agile, such that in some way his agility comes as a surprise in light of his size.[11]

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10 See also Neale (1999: 63).

11 There is a further similarity between the pluralist view of definite descriptions and the pluralist view Bach and Neale endorse: although syntactically 'Cal' and 'on the phone' occur just once in (6), Bach and Neale claim that both propositions feature semantic correlates for those terms. Similarly, [the F is G] expresses two propositions, both of which feature the semantic correlate for the term [G]. The same phenomenon is present in (11):

Pluralist views of semantic content have been proposed by others as well,[12] but of particular interest here is the way Bach argues for his pluralist proposal:

> [M]any people, if forced to make a choice, would say that [(5) is] true anyway. But would they want to deny that what is expressed by the material between the commas is part of what is said? Surely not. Bach (1999: 345)

Bach's suggestion is that if given the option, one might say that (5) says something true and something false, though the true proposition may be more important in the context, and hence that one's intuitions about the truth of (5) are ambivalent to some degree.

4. Pluralism and Compositionality

Is compositionality a problem for pluralism?[13] Consider some sentence S that putatively expresses multiple contents. Suppose S is embedded in a more complex sentence T. Does T express multiple contents as well? An example will suggest that it does.

We will disregard cases where S is embedded under an intensional operator (as noted in footnote 2), since the complexities of intensional contexts take us beyond the scope of what we could reasonably investigate here. But we can consider S embedded under an extensional operator like sentential negation: does 'it is not the case that S' express two propositions, the negation of the general proposition expressed by S and the negation of the singular proposition also expressed by S? Or does the negation apply to just one of those propositions?

The proposal advanced here is that 'it is not the case that the F is G' expresses both *it is not the case that (exactly one thing is F and that thing is G)* and *it is not the case that A is G*, where A is the unique thing at α exemplifying F-ness. When we ask whether the speaker has said

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'huge' and 'agile' occur just once in (11), but have a semantic correlate in both propositions expressed.

12 Bach (1999: 351 n29) cites Bellert (1977), Espinal (1991), Fabb (1990), and Neale (1999). Ciecierski (2009) notes Corazza (2002) as well.

13 Thanks to multiple referees for suggesting a discussion of this matter.

something true or false, we should have clear intuitions that the speaker spoke truly if both propositions are true, and ambivalent intuitions when one proposition is true but the other false.

If we are evaluating the sentence for truth/falsity at the world of utterance, no case prompting ambivalent intuitions will arise. Consider world α, where Ballmer is the CEO of Microsoft, and Anna utters the sentence 'It is not the case that the CEO of Microsoft is cold-hearted'. On the orthodox Russellian view, Anna has said something true just in case there is a unique CEO and that person is not cold-hearted. Since Ballmer is the unique CEO, Anna spoke falsely if Ballmer is cold-hearted, and truly if he isn't. On the pluralist view at issue, we will find exactly the same predication. Anna has expressed two negative propositions: the negative general proposition predicted by the Russellian, and in addition the negative singular proposition *It is not the case that Ballmer is cold-hearted*. The second proposition is true at α just in case the first proposition is true at α.

To test the pluralist view, we must consider cases where the two propositions diverge in truth-value. We will thus apply the modal profile test again, and evaluate Anna's α-world utterance for truth/falsity at some other world. If we ask whether Anna has said something true of world β, where the CEO is a warm-hearted individual but Ballmer is cold-hearted, we should expect ambivalent intuitions, mirroring exactly the original modal profile example for Alice's utterance 'The CEO is a ninny'.

5. Indirect Reports as Motivation for Pluralism

There is a second argument for pluralism that is independent of the considerations offered in the previous sections; suppose again that Alice utters

(4)   The CEO of Microsoft is a ninny.

Suppose once again that she could neither correctly name Steve Ballmer as the CEO nor pick him out of a lineup. If I hear Alice say this, and I subsequently encounter Ballmer, I can legitimately say to him

(8)   Alice said that you are a ninny.

Admittedly, Alice would not say 'Ballmer is a ninny'—she does not realize that Ballmer is the CEO. Nevertheless, my report to Ballmer is legitimate; why? The pluralist claims that (4) expresses [relative to context of utterance C] the singular proposition *Ballmer is a ninny* in addition to the general proposition predicted by the Russellian analysis of the definite description.

It is of course controversial whether the indirect report in (8) is clear evidence that (4) expresses (relative to C) the singular proposition in question; we will consider this point in much more detail in Section 8. But certainly if (4) does express a singular proposition, it is not due to anything like Donnellan's referential use, since Alice has no referential intentions concerning Ballmer at all.

If Alice did not have Ballmer in mind, how could (4) relative to C express such a singular proposition? In the same way that

(9)   I am awake now

when used by Rip van Winkle expresses a proposition about a time 20 years later than the time he thinks he is talking about. Van Winkle asserts (9), but would not assert

(10) I am awake in the year 1790

despite the fact [presuming that Kaplan's theory is correct] that the two utterances express the same proposition. The character of the indexical 'now' provides a rule that determines a content upon supplementation of contextual factors. In the case of 'now', the contextual factors concern the date of the utterance; 'now' expresses a singular content in virtue of the contextual facts regarding the date of the utterance. Similarly, (4) expresses a singular proposition about Ballmer in virtue of the fact that he satisfies the description. Since we have no reason to doubt that the general proposition was also expressed by (4), we arrive at the pluralist view.

Complications arise if there are multiple definite descriptions in a single sentence; a pluralist will hold that a sentence expresses four

propositions if it contains instances of both [The F] and [The G], since each description generates both a plural and a singular content. The indirect quotation test confirms this prediction. Suppose that Alice is unaware that Ballmer is the CEO of Microsoft and that Jeff Haikes is the CEO of the Gates Foundation, and asserts

(11) The CEO of Microsoft gave money to the CEO of the Gates Foundation.

Knowing these facts about the two organizations, we can report to Ballmer that Alice thinks he gave money to the Gates Foundation CEO, and to Haikes that Alice thinks he received money from the Microsoft CEO, and to the pair of them that Alice thinks *this* guy gave money to *that* guy.

The modal profile test also suggests that four propositions are expressed by (11), though the example becomes unwieldy. We can cut through the complications by considering some simpler cases. Suppose Alice utters

(12) The CEO of Microsoft gave money to Steve Jobs.

(12) is like (4) but with a different predicate. When we ask whether (12) is true of world β, where Bill Gates is the CEO and gave money to Jobs and Ballmer is not the CEO and did not give Jobs money, we have ambivalent intuitions, since the predicate is false of Ballmer but true of the description's satisfier at β. Pluralism explains the ambivalence: the general proposition expressed at α by (12) is true at β, but the singular proposition expressed at α by (12) is false. Now suppose Alice utters

(13) Steve Jobs gave money to the CEO of the Gates Foundation.

The satisfier of the description at α is Jeff Haikes. At world γ the description is satisfied by Melinda Gates, and at γ Jobs gave money to her but not to Haikes. Here too we have ambivalent intuitions in asking whether (13) is true at γ. Now combine the cases; suppose Alice utters

(14) The CEO of Microsoft gave money to the CEO of the Gates

Foundation

Imagine a world δ where Ballmer does not give money to Haikes, where Bill is the Microsoft CEO and Melinda is the Gates Foundation CEO, and where some pairings of these individuals exchange money and some do not. Our intuitions about whether (14) is true of δ are muddled; they pull us in conflicting directions to consider facts about all four individuals. This suggests that all four propositions are expressed by (14) at α: a fully general proposition, a singular proposition about both Ballmer and Haikes, and singular propositions with each of those individuals alone as constituents.

6. Alternative Diagnoses

The case for pluralism rests on the modal profile test from Section 1 and the indirect quotation test from Section 5. One might wonder, however, whether those data can be explained without resorting to pluralism. In this section we will show that other attempts to explain the data are inferior to the pluralist account.

We saw in Section 5 that when Alice says [the F is G], it seems intuitively legitimate to report 'Alice said that [A is G]', and that pluralism can account for the legitimacy of this report. The first rival explanation to consider is an appeal to Gricean implicature. All else being equal, it is less revisionary to hold that a sentence has surprising implicatures than to claim that the sentence has a surprising semantic content. Before one can take pluralism seriously, then, we must show why the data presented in Section 1 and Section 5 cannot be explained by saying that singular propositions are mere implicatures of [the F is G].

Consider first the proposal that singular propositions are *conversational* implicatures. A mark of conversational implicature is that the speaker intentionally conveys the proposition in question, although that proposition is not the conventional meaning of the sentence. Conversational implicatures are generated when the audience recognizes that the speaker would be violating the cooperative principle if she were

intending to convey the conventional meaning of the sentence. The audience reconciles this apparent violation by recognizing further that the speaker must have been intending to convey some other proposition, which is the conversational implicature.

The data we have witnessed above do not exhibit this last feature. The singular proposition *Ballmer is a ninny* cannot count as the conversational implicature of (4), since the general proposition *exactly one thing is a CEO of Microsoft, and that thing is a ninny*, which the Gricean would identify as the conventional meaning of (4), already satisfies the cooperative principle.

If the singular proposition is a mere implicature of Alice's utterance of (4), it would thus seem to be a conventional implicature, not a conversational implicature. Griceans hold that conventional implicatures are part of the meaning of the sentence, but do not factor into the truth-conditions. But the modal profile test suggests that our intuitions about the truth at β of *Ballmer is a ninny* are relevant to the truth of what Alice said: when we consider world β [where the unique individual who is a Microsoft CEO is a ninny, though Ballmer is not], we are ambivalent about whether Alice has said something true about β. If the proposition *Ballmer is a ninny* were merely a conventional implicature, then the truth of *the individual who is uniquely a Microsoft CEO is a ninny* at β should leave us with unequivocal intuitions that (4) is true at β. Thus for the same reasons that Bach (1999) suggests that 'but' expresses an additional proposition rather than conventionally implicating that proposition, the singular proposition does not count as a conventional implicature of Alice's utterance.

Many take Donnellan's referential uses of definite descriptions to be a non-semantic phenomenon; if the referential contents of [the F] posited above could be classified as Donnellanian referential uses, perhaps we could deny that they count as contents semantically expressed by the utterance. But as noted above, the data at issue are quite different from Donnellan's referential uses; the suggestion has been that (4) expresses *Ballmer is a ninny* even though the speaker is in this case unaware that

Ballmer is the unique individual exemplifying *being the CEO of Microsoft*. Further, Donnellan's referential uses are meant to allow that one can use [The F] to refer to an individual that is not F at all; the claim here, by contrast, is that [The F] will express a singular content, but the individual designated will always be the individual who is uniquely F, since this is how the context fixes on the individual. Thus the data do not fit the criteria for referential uses in Donnellan's sense.

One might attempt instead to explain the data in terms of presupposition.[14] If S semantically presupposes p, both S and not-S must entail p. But we have no reason to think that 'It is not the case that the CEO of Microsoft is a ninny' should entail *Ballmer is a ninny*, and pluralism will not predict that such an entailment holds. Thus the singular proposition *Ballmer is a ninny* is surely not a semantic presupposition of (4). Neither can we satisfactorily claim that the singular proposition is a pragmatic presupposition of (4); we might take p to be pragmatically presupposed if it was part of the common ground, the background knowledge taken for granted by all participants in the conversation. But since Alice does not realize that Ballmer is the CEO, the singular proposition *Ballmer is a ninny* is certainly not part of the common ground when she utters (4).

Some (notably, Wettstein (1981)) have suggested that definite descriptions are ambiguous between singular and non-singular contents; on the ambiguity view, some instances of [The F is G] express a general proposition while others express a singular proposition, but no instance expresses both propositions. The prima facie evidence for pluralism over the ambiguity view is that in applying the modal profile test, we are ambivalent about whether Alice has said something true of β, which is explained by suggesting that Alice has expressed two propositions, one true and the other false of β. On the ambiguity view, that ambivalence would have to be explained away as an epistemic uncertainty—one might suggest that we the audience are unsure whether (4) expressed the

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14 Thanks to a referee for prompting consideration of this proposal.

singular proposition or the general proposition. But in applying the modal profile test in Section 1, we stipulated that Alice does not know that Ballmer is the CEO; the ambiguity theory is committed to saying that some instances of [The F is G] express a singular proposition, and given what we have just noticed about Alice and (4), the conditions determining that a singular proposition was expressed could not be a matter of the speaker's referential intentions. What else would make it the case that an instance of a definite description expresses a singular proposition? The ambiguity theory has to explain what distinguishes (4) from other sentences that express general propositions; the pluralist, on the other hand, does not distinguish between different instances of [The F is G]; her theory applies to all such sentences. The ambiguity theory is thus forced to make an ad hoc distinction where the pluralist is not.

Another view of [The F is G] holds that it expresses something that falls short of a complete proposition—on this view, it is semantically *underdetermined* whether the sentence expresses a singular or general proposition.[15] Such a view could explain the ambivalent intuitions observed with the modal profile test—we are pulled in two directions in asking whether Alice has said something true of β because she has failed to express a complete proposition.[16] While this view could explain the data from the modal profile test, it will not so easily explain the indirect report data noted in Section 5; it seems legitimate to tell Ballmer that Alice said he is a ninny; on this underdetermination view, Alice failed to express any complete proposition whatsoever, let alone the singular proposition that Ballmer is a ninny. The pluralist account fares better

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15 See Bezuidenhout (1997), for instance; thanks to an anonymous review for suggesting discussion of this view.
16 The underdetermination account can say further that the ambivalence derives from the fact that some of the propositions that constitute completions of this underdetermined content are true, while others are false. If both the general proposition and the singular proposition stemming from completing the underdetermined content had the same truth-value, perhaps our intuitions about the truth-value would no longer pull us in opposite directions. This would allow the underdetermination proponent to explain why our intuitions about the truth-value of [the F is G] are not *always* ambivalent.

than the underdetermination view in explaining our intuitions about indirect reports.

There are still other ways to explain the phenomena that, for reasons of space, we cannot hope to rule out here; for instance, one might suggest that, rather than expressing two distinct proposition, [The F is G] expresses a single proposition consisting of some non-classical connective uniting *exactly one thing is F and G* and *A is G*.[17] Such a proposal would have to explain why we are ambivalent about whether this proposition is true of β, and why we find it legitimate to report Alice as having expressed both of these constituent propositions. That imposes a serious constraint, but if one were to develop such a view, it would be a rival worth considering.

7. Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism

Pluralists hold that a singular proposition is semantically expressed by an utterance of [The F is G], where that proposition is generated as a function of the satisfier of [The F] at the world-time of utterance. As a result, the pluralist holds that definite descriptions are [partially] context-sensitive. Cappelen and Lepore (2005) argue for a semantic minimalism that limits context-sensitivity in semantics to the familiar examples of indexicality due to Kaplan.[18] Pluralists effectively extend this context-sensitivity to definite descriptions as well.[19] Cappelen and Lepore raise forceful arguments against the haphazard positing of context-sensitivity in semantics; we will consider their concerns in this section, beginning by clarifying the dialectic.

First, the sort of context-sensitivity that Cappelen and Lepore attack is not the sort posited by the pluralist. Their target is a contextualist who holds that contextual *salience* determines what proposition is expressed;

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17 See Ciecierski (2009) for discussion of non-classical connectives as an alternative to pluralism.

18 Cappelen and Lepore (2005: 2).

19 To be more precise, pluralism claims that definite descriptions are merely *partially* indexical, since context is involved in generating the singular proposition but not in generating the general proposition expressed by [the F is G].

for instance, the contextualist about 'knows' may hold that the degree of warrant required to count as 'knowledge' varies with respect to what alternative explanations of the data are relevant in the context. The context-sensitivity a pluralist posits for definite descriptions is not sensitive to any contextual factor's degree of salience. For the pluralist, the relevant contextual fact is supplied by identifying the individual that satisfies [The F] in the world-time of utterance. This point is significant; Cappelen and Lepore distinguish between 'moderate' and 'radical' contextualist views, the former suggesting that only certain lexical items are context-sensitive, while the latter suggests that context-sensitivity is pervasive. They take pains to argue (2005: chapter 3) that moderate contextualism is *prima facie* much more plausible than radical contextualism, but argue that the motivations supporting moderate contextualism push one into endorsing radical contextualism. Thus in their view, the more appealing versions of contextualism are unstable. The pluralist, however, is not imperiled by this threat of a slippery slope; the context-sensitivity she posits for definite descriptions has no application to predicates like 'is flat', 'is green', 'knows that p', etc., so the pluralist is not forced by grounds of consistency into embracing radical contextualism.

Second, the context-sensitivity invoked by the pluralist applies only to the *singular* proposition expressed by [The F is G]. The general proposition is, for all we have suggested here, entirely context-independent, expressing in any context of utterance the general proposition *exactly one thing in the universe is F, and that thing is G.* Contextualists may invoke further context-sensitivity to explain how the general proposition can be true when more than one thing is F, and anti-contextualists may propose alternative theories about the general proposition expressed in these cases. As noted in Section 2, the pluralist can if she wishes grant to the minimalist that there is no context-sensitivity involved in generating the general proposition.

Independently of these points, however, Cappelen and Lepore do raise two issues that merit the pluralist's attention; these issues will be

addressed in the following two sections. The first is a methodological challenge to many attempts to posit context-sensitivity, and the second is a presentation of some tests for context-sensitivity that allegedly embarrass radical contextualist proposals.

8. Methodological Questions

Cappelen and Lepore (1997)[20] argue forcefully against the methodology we have used to motivate pluralism:

> An overlooked assumption in the semantics literature concerns a connection between semantic content … and indirect speech. In a simple form this assumption is that an adequate semantic theory T for a language L should assign p as the semantic content of a sentence S in L iff in uttering S a speaker says that p. We shall call this assumption MA…. That a semantic theory should specify what is said by utterances of sentences seems innocent enough, but … when this assumption is embodied by MA, semanticists both misconstrue the aim of semantics and unreasonably constrain the semantics for indirect speech. (1997: 278-279)

Cappelen and Lepore argue that the legitimacy of an indirect report is neither necessary nor sufficient for identifying the reported content as the proposition expressed by the original utterance. This poses a threat to the arguments presented in favor of pluralism, since the argument in Section 5 explicitly relies on indirect reports as evidence of semantic content, while the modal profile argument from Section 1 may implicitly rely on indirect reports as well.[21]

The controversial thesis invoked in motivating Kaplan's views and pluralism is:

(MA) P is the semantic content of S iff in uttering S, the speaker says that p.

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20 See also Cappelen and Lepore (2005: chapter 4).
21 Cappelen and Lepore (1997: 280) write 'We ourselves don't see how to elicit intuitions about what-is-said by an utterance of a sentence without appealing to intuitions about the accuracy of indirect reports', and the modal profile test certainly appeals to intuitions about what-is-said.

The dialectic stands as follows: the arguments for pluralism presuppose MA. Cappelen and Lepore present a series of examples that seem to embarrass MA. In this section, we will review these examples, and find that they can be diagnosed in one of two ways: some examples are not as threatening as Cappelen and Lepore suppose; others pose a problem for MA, but do not threaten a revised version of MA ('MA*') that does all the work needed for the pluralist's arguments to succeed. In the end, we will find no reason to doubt (MA*), and hence no reason to deem the arguments for pluralism questionable.

The first pair of cases Cappelen and Lepore proffer (1997: 282-283) involve reports that seem to simplify the content of the original utterance:

(15) A: I bought a pair of Bruno Magli shoes and then I ate lunch.

(16) A said that he bought a pair of Bruno Magli shoes.

(17) A: I own a very expensive pair of brown Bruno Magli shoes.

(18) A said that he owns a pair of Bruno Magli shoes.

The contents expressed by (15) and (17) are clearly more complex than that reported in (16) and (18), so it is not plausible that (16) and (18) report the propositions expressed by (15) and (17) respectively. One could defend MA by suggesting that (15) and (17) each express multiple simple propositions rather than one complex proposition, but Cappelen and Lepore offer another case that cannot be resolved in that way:

(19) A: At around 11 p.m., I put on a white shirt, a blue suit, dark socks and my brown Bruno Magli shoes. I then got into a waiting limousine and drove off into heavy traffic to the airport, where I just made my midnight flight to Chicago.

(20) A said that he dressed around 11 p.m., went to the airport, and took the midnight flight to Chicago.

It is implausible that the proposition reported in (20) is even one among several propositions expressed by (19). One could argue, however, that the content of (19) *entails* the proposition reported in (20). So we might revise MA by saying that, at least on some occasions, one can legitimately report that A said that p in uttering S when the content expressed by S entails that p. We should not think that *any* entailment can be reported as something that A said; it would be absurd to suppose that for any arbitrary utterance it is legitimate to report the speaker as having expressed every necessary truth. But we might at least preserve one horn of the biconditional in amending MA as follows:

> (MA*): where it is legitimate to report A as having said that p in uttering S, p is entailed by the semantic content expressed by S.[22]

MA* would explain the legitimacy of (16), (18), and (20). It would not, however, explain away the legitimacy of the report

> (8)   Alice said that you are a ninny.

The general proposition expressed by 'The CEO of Microsoft is a ninny' does not entail the singular proposition *Ballmer is a ninny*, since that singular content follows only given the further contextual facts concerning who at the world-time of utterance uniquely exemplifies F-ness. MA* would thus not undermine the motivations for positing pluralism.

Cappelen and Lepore consider other problems (1997: 285) for MA that also seem to threaten MA*:

> (21) A: Did Alice pass the exam?

> (22) Professor H: I didn't fail any students.

> (23) A: Professor H said that Alice passed her exam.

The proposition expressed in (22) is neither the content reported in (23), nor does it entail that content, so MA* will not account for the

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22 Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this concise formulation of MA*.

report. But interestingly, the pluralist position *could* account for the legitimacy of (23). The general proposition expressed by (22) is equivalent to the universally quantified proposition *every student passed*, and given the additional contextual fact that Alice is a student, the pluralist might predict that (22) expresses the singular proposition reported in (23) in addition to a general proposition.

Pluralism dispels the other criticisms Cappelen and Lepore offer against the relevant horn[23] of MA as well. Consider:

(24) Bill: Bob dislikes that guy. (pointing at Andre, though Bill does not know the identity of the person he is pointing at)

(25) Bill said that Bob dislikes Andre

(26) Francois: Chartreuse is Maria's favorite color.

(27) Francois said that *the color of that dress* is Maria's favorite color.

Without the pluralist view, (25) and (27) pose challenges to (MA). But the pluralist view allows that (24) expresses the singular proposition reported in (25). (26) expresses a singular proposition about chartreuse, but the orthodox view of definite descriptions would suggest that (27) reports only a general proposition. The pluralist view predicts that (27) reports both a general and a singular proposition, and hence we can account for the legitimacy of (27). Pluralism in fact predicts ambivalence about the legitimacy of the report, since it attributes to Francois two propositions expressed where (26) expresses only the singular proposition. This ambivalence seems the correct prediction; in uttering (26) Francois did not say anything about the dress mentioned in (27), and so we may well experience some ambivalence in assessing the truth of (27).

We have thus made two moves in response to Cappelen and Lepore's

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23 Cappelen and Lepore attack both horns of the biconditional in MA, but for present purposes we are only interested in one of those two horns. A fully developed methodology for semantics would say something about the other horn as well, but those questions lie beyond the scope of this paper.

criticisms; the first is to allow that a report may be legitimate when it attributes something entailed by the proposition originally expressed, and the other is the pluralist position that allows that the reported content is *one* (but not the *only*) proposition expressed. These two suggestions help dispel the problems Cappelen and Lepore raise for MA.

9. Diagnostic Tests for Context-Sensitivity

Part of Cappelen and Lepore's arguments against contextualism is that there are linguistically respectable tests for context-sensitivity, and that such tests do not support the radical contextualist's view. As we will see, however, pluralism passes those tests.

The first of these tests[24] makes use of disquotational indirect reports as a way of testing for context-sensitivity. Where there are no context-sensitive terms in the reported utterance, the disquotational indirect report will be true, but where there are context-sensitive terms, the disquotational indirect report may well be false. Consider first an example without context-sensitive terms:

(28) [uttered at context C1] A: President Obama is a Democrat.

(29) [uttered at context C2] B: A said that President Obama is a Democrat.

None of the terms in (28) are context-sensitive, so the disquotational report in (29) is true. Now consider an example of context-sensitivity:

(30) [uttered at context C1] A: I am happy.

(31) [uttered at context C2] B: A said that I am happy.

Since 'I' in (30) is context-sensitive, the disquotational report in (31) is false—context C2 features a different speaker than C1, and this difference exposes the context-sensitivity of the term in (30).

We can apply the test to definite descriptions as follows:

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24 See Cappelen and Lepore (2005: 88-89).

(32) [uttered in 1810]   A: The president is powerful.

(33) [uttered in 2010]   B: A said that the president is powerful.

We should consider two questions: what does the pluralist predict concerning the truth of (33), and is that prediction correct?

We should take care in answering the first question. Pluralists will say that two propositions were expressed in (32), and likewise in (33). The general proposition expressed by (32) is exactly the general proposition that in (33) B reports as being expressed by (32). The singular proposition that pluralists claim was expressed in (32), however, is not the singular proposition that in (33) B reports as being expressed by (32). Thus the pluralist predicts a mixed verdict concerning the truth of (33). And as noted above,[25] where a sentence expresses one true proposition and one false proposition, we might expect that one proposition is more salient than the other and hence that our intuitions about the truth-value may not be pulled equally in both directions. What, then, should the pluralist predict about (33)? Perhaps just this: that there is some discomfort in saying unequivocally that (33) is true; the fact that the singular propositions differ offers at least some basis for hesitating in calling (33) true.

Does that prediction bear out here? There are some complications that we should try to account for before answering that question. If A were using the description referentially in (32), it might be easier to imagine that a singular proposition is expressed, so let us suppose instead that A is using it attributively. To help emphasize that reading, we might insert the modifier 'whomever she/he is' after the definite description. If we insert the same modifier in (33), there is surely some hesitation in deeming (33) a true report of A's utterance. (33) seems to attribute to A a claim about a 2010 individual. If B instead uttered

(34) [uttered in 2010]   B: A said that the then-president is

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25 See Bach (1999: 346-347) and Neale (1999: 63).

powerful

the hesitation in deeming the report true disappears. But this is exactly as the pluralist will predict. Since 'the then-president' unlike 'the president' would be satisfied by Madison rather than Obama, (34) reports A as expressing two propositions, both of which are the contents of (32) according to the pluralist.

One might imagine interpreting (32) as uttered by A as expressing a generic claim about presidents rather than using 'The president' as an attributively used description; if A is speaking about some arbitrary president, in the way that one might speak of an arbitrary dog in uttering 'the dog is a friendly animal', it is less obvious that a singular proposition is expressed. This should not trouble the pluralist, however; plausibly, the semantics of generics expressed with definite descriptions should resemble the semantics of generics expressed with other constructions (e.g., 'Presidents are powerful'), and a natural account of generics will assimilate the generic use of [the F] to the quantifier phrase [most Fs], in which case the pluralist will not (and should not) predict an expressed singular proposition.[26]

The second test Cappelen and Lepore discuss is the collectivity test. We can get a grasp of this test by seeing how they argue that 'knows' is not context-sensitive, contrary to the contextualist analysis. Suppose a person in a bar says that Obama knows that he has hands, and an epistemologist in the classroom says that Obama knows that he has hands. Because the speakers were in different contexts, the contextualist predicts that the two speakers have said different things. However, it seems felicitous to report that *both* have said that Obama knows that he has hands; the felicity of this collective report seems to suggest, contrary to the contextualist, that the person in the bar and the contextualist have said the same thing. If 'knows' were context-sensitive, it would not in general be felicitous to say

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26 Liebsman (forthcoming) alternatively proposes that the generic use of [the F] denotes a kind; if so, the pluralist could allow that uses of the generic definite description express a singular proposition about the *kind*, rather than a singular proposition about some individual.

that both have said that Obama knows that he has hands.

We can apply the collectivity test to definite descriptions as follows:

(35) [uttered in 1810]   A: the president is powerful.

(36) [uttered in 2010]   B: the president is powerful.

As before, pluralism predicts ambivalent intuitions about the truth-value of the collective report

(37) C: Both A and B said that the president is powerful

since (35) and (36) express the same general proposition but distinct singular propositions. Whether we imagine that A and B are using 'the president' attributively or referentially, this prediction seems correct.[27] Thus the pluralist's claim that definite descriptions are partially context-sensitive seems to be supported by the collectivity test.

There is a third test that Cappelen and Lepore (2005: 104-108) offer for context-sensitivity. If no term in S is context-sensitive, one cannot truly say

> There is a false utterance of [S] even though S.

If a term in S is context-sensitive, however, one may be able to truly say such a thing. Correlatively,

> There is a true utterance of [S] even though S is false

cannot be uttered truly if S lacks any context-sensitive terms. Standard examples of indexicality pass this test: one can truly say

> There is a false utterance of 'I am hungry' even though I am hungry.

Cappelen and Lepore argue (2005: 110-112) that the common examples

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27 As with the disquotation test, if we imagine instead that (35) and (36) are generics, then (37) does seem perfectly felicitous. In that case, however, we can again observe that generics are plausibly equivalent to sentences of the form *Most Fs are Gs*, in which case the pluralist will speculate that (35)-(36) express just one proposition apiece, and that it is the same proposition in both cases.

offered by contextualists fail this test; if there is a true utterance of 'Obama knows that he has hands,' then Obama knows that he has hands.

Clearly we are meant to presume that the point of evaluation is held fixed when applying this test. It would not do to say that 'knows' is context-sensitive simply because a 1961 utterance of 'Obama knows that he has hands' was false [at 1961] even though Obama [in 2012] knows that he has hands. So we can clarify the test as follows:

> A term in S is context-sensitive when one can truly say 'there is an utterance of [S] that is false *at t* even though S is true *at t*.'

Applying this test, for a definite description to be context-sensitive, we would expect that there is an utterance of 'the F is G' that is false at t even though the F is G at t. And since the pluralist thinks that definite descriptions are merely partially context-sensitive, the pluralist should predict in particular that there is an utterance of 'the F is G' that is not unequivocally true at t even though it is unequivocally true that the F is G at t. Consider an example:

> (38) There is an utterance of 'the President is a Democrat' that is not unequivocally true at 2012 even though it is unequivocally true that the President is a Democrat at 2012.

The utterance mentioned at the beginning of (38) might be a 2004 utterance. Is a 2004 utterance of 'the President is a Democrat' unequivocally true at 2012? I do not think so; part of what the 2004 utterance says is something about Bush, and Bush is not a Democrat in 2012. Pluralism thus passes this test as well; definite descriptions do seem to be partially context-sensitive.

Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009: 54-55) offer one further test for context-sensitivity: if A utters S in context C and B utters S in C', and in a third context C" one can felicitously report

> A and B agree that S

then we have evidence that S is not context-sensitive. If the report is

infelicitous, we have evidence that S is context-sensitive. We can apply this test to definite descriptions by again considering

(35) [uttered in 1810]   A: the president is powerful.

(36) [uttered in 2010]   B: the president is powerful.

Cappelen and Hawthorne's test calls for us to consider the report

(39) A and B agree that the president is powerful.

The pluralist predicts ambivalent intuitions about the truth of this report: (35) and (36) each express the same general proposition, but they express different singular propositions. In light of this, we should again expect ambivalent intuitions about the truth of (39)—there is something about which A and B agree, but something else (singular propositions about Madison and Obama) about which they do not agree (at least from what we can tell given the facts about (35) and (36)). The prediction is born out; (39) is not entirely infelicitous, but neither is it entirely felicitous. This test, like the others, thus sustains the pluralist's predictions.

10. Conclusion

The considerations presented here fall short of a conclusive argument for the pluralist view of definite descriptions. They do suffice, however, to show that the view deserves more attention than it has to date received.[28]

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