

Pulling Semantic Contextualism Out by Its Roots

This is a draft. Comments welcome.

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§1. Introduction

Pia has a Japanese maple (Travis, 1997, p. 89). She doesn't cotton to the reddish hue of its leaves, so she paints them green. The task completed, she says, "That's better. The leaves on my tree are green now." Intuitively, Pia has spoken the truth.

A few moments later her botanist friend Bill calls, soliciting samples for a study on the chemistry of green leaves. Pia says, "The leaves on my tree are green. You can have them." Intuitively, Pia has spoken the false.

The truth-value of an assertion depends upon two factors: what it says to be so, and what is so. If we assume that Pia's two assertions say the same thing to be so, we must credit the difference in truth value to a change in what is relevantly so. In this case, that would amount to supposing that the leaves have changed their color. They haven't. The right conclusion to draw from the thought experiment, then, is that "there are two distinguishable things to be said in speaking [the sentence, 'The leaves are green']... [E]ach would be true under different conditions" (Travis, 1997, p. 89).

The foregoing exemplifies what I will call a *contrasting-case argument*.¹ Contrasting-case arguments aim to support *semantic contextualism*, which may be roughly characterized as the view that the contents of utterances are shaped in far-reaching and unobvious ways by the contexts in which they are uttered. The issues I want to address here about contrasting-case arguments (and related arguments for contextualism) do not require our having on the

¹More commonly, they are called *context shifting arguments*, following Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

table a fully precise and satisfying characterization of the general view that such arguments are supposed to help establish. But I will say something about the larger conceptual and theoretical background in §2.

In the recent literature, even opponents of semantic contextualism (henceforth, just “contextualism”) tend to grant the first step of contrasting-case arguments. That is, they accept the legitimacy of the intuitions about truth-value difference; they just believe that contextualism is not the only way to accommodate the intuitions. But it seems to me that the most interesting issues raised by contrasting-case arguments concern the validity of the first step. It’s true that these issues can seem elusive or amorphous. But I believe they are worth discussing, and I will try to go some distance with them here.

§2. Truth-conditionality, context-dependence and contextualism

The content of an utterance is *what is said* by that utterance.² What one says in an utterance is to be contrasted with what one implicates, something we also sometimes refer to as an utterance’s “meaning”. (E.g., “When he said, ‘I’m happy to be here,’ he meant that he wasn’t.”) Reflection on the kind of phenomena that seem to support contextualism have also led some writers on pragmatics to doubt, or at least to seek to complicate, the traditional Gricean distinction between what is said and what is implicated, but that is not directly our concern here.

In an assertion, what is said is that something is so. If I assert, “My son goes to nursery school,” I’ve said something to be so, namely, that my son goes to nursery school. This suggests that, at least in the case of assertions (and perhaps derivatively in the case of other kinds of utterance), the content of an utterance is truth-conditional. This thought is shared by Frege, Davidson and Wittgenstein. As the latter put the thought in the *Tractatus*:

²Some philosophers believe that semantic contextualism is not best glossed as a thesis about what is said by an utterance, preferring recourse to more technical terminology such as “the proposition expressed” by an uttered sentence. The reason is that talk of what is said is thought to be apt only for capturing the speech-act content of an utterance, understood to include (among other things) what used to be called implicatures, and hence obviously context-dependent in ways not capturable by a compositional semantics for the language in the manner described in the text below. My own view is that a proper understanding of language in use requires the assumption that there is a notion of saying linked with properly semantic content, and that much of what I say in what follows provides support for this assumption. But I will not engage this topic directly here.

“A sentence in use shows how things stand if it is true. And it says that they do so stand” (Wittgenstein, 1961, §4.022). I will put the thesis that content is truth-conditional like this: for any given assertion, there is a statement of the conditions under which the assertion is true that specifies the content of that assertion.

The reason I formulate the thesis as a (universally quantified) existential proposition is the familiar point that not every true T-sentence—i.e., not every true biconditional of the form, “S is true iff p”, with S replaced by a name of an object-language sentence and p replaced by a sentence of the meta-language—specifies the content of an utterance of S. (E.g., “‘Snow is white’ is true iff grass is green”.) Thus formulated, however, the truth-conditionality thesis obviously does not take us any distance toward reducing the notion of content to the notion of truth condition. That might seem to render the thesis pointless; in fact, it shows that the proposition that content is truth-conditional is a substantive claim quite independently of the prospects for a reductive analysis of the concept of content.

Whether the pursuit of a reductive account is itself worthwhile or feasible is not a question we need engage with here.³ But two points in this vicinity are worth keeping in mind in the discussion to come. First, the truth-conditionality thesis glossed as here accords with a thought that is in opposition to at least some strategies for reduction: the thought, namely, that if you wish to identify the content of a given assertive utterance, the only way to do so is to *say* what is said yourself—that is, to use a sentence fit for expressing that content to express that very content.⁴ This is in opposition to

³ Reduction is not the only way to try to shed philosophical illumination on the notion of content. We might seek instead to bring out its role within a larger circle of concepts. Such is Davidson’s project on one interpretation of it. So construed, Davidson’s considered position is that a true T-sentence for a given object-language sentence serves as an adequate specification of the truth-conditional content of utterances of that sentence only if: 1) it issues from a theory of meaning that comprehensively assigns true T-sentences to all the sentences of the object-language on the basis of a finite set of axioms assigning semantic properties to subsentential expressions and 2) the T-sentences generated by the theory articulate truth conditions we would assign to utterances by speakers of the object language in the course of *radical interpretation* of those speakers, in which truth-condition, belief and preference assignments are jointly reached so as to render the speakers rational and intelligible to us. On this picture, we illuminate the notion of content by careful consideration of its place in rational-psychological explanation. For the richest development of this somewhat idealized (in my view) accounting of Davidson’s views on meaning and interpretation, see Wiggins (1997b).

⁴On this point see McDowell (1998).

a vision of theorization about meaning according to which our ground-floor efforts to elucidate the content of an utterance should take the form of descriptions of a certain item (i.e., the content) associated with the utterance. The second point is that one reason sometimes given for favoring intensional over classical truth-conditional semantics—that extensional theories are too coarse-grained to capture content—rests on a misunderstanding of the role and interpretation of T-sentences on the truth-conditional picture.⁵

Utterances are not the only linguistic items that have meanings; expressions do as well. What is the relationship between the content of an assertion and the meaning of the sentence asserted? I have already tacitly assumed an answer to this question. Put without nuance, the view is that the content of an assertive utterance is wholly provided for by the sentence asserted. That is, sentences apt for assertive utterance have semantic properties that fully determine what would be said in asserting them; when one asserts the sentence, one's assertion simply has that content. We need this view if we want to move, as I tacitly did above, from the truth-conditionality thesis to the further thought that we can specify the contents of any assertive utterance of a given sentence with a T-sentence assigning a truth condition to the sentence itself.

That the view is going to require at least some qualification is obvious: an utterance by me of “I am American” has a different content than an utterance of that sentence by you, for example, so no truth-conditional assignment to the sentence is capable of specifying the contents of both utterances of it. The problem, of course, is that the reference of “I” varies depending upon context, in particular, depending upon the speaker. The consensus solution to this problem, and to that of indexicality in general, is to grant that sentences in themselves do not have truth conditions; rather, they need to be coupled with indices—where indices are understood as n-tuples containing such things as the agent, time, location, demonstratum, etc.—in order for truth conditions to enter the picture.⁶ The phenomena of ambiguity and ellipsis, meanwhile, have prompted a further modification: that it is not an uttered sentence itself, but its ‘logical form’, as it is sometimes called—i.e., a syntactic item

⁵Moreover, insofar as the first point is correct, intensional semantics, whatever its legitimate theoretical uses, cannot itself achieve the goal some of its advocates mistakenly ascribe to truth-conditional semantics.

⁶Indices are sometimes called “contexts”. I use “context” in this paper to mean context—i.e., non-technically. So understood, the context of an utterance is what determines its index.

that lexically and structurally disambiguates, and perhaps fills in any ellipses of, the uttered sentence—that conjoins with an index to produce an item apt for possession of truth conditions.

Let us stipulate that *semantic* properties of linguistic expressions must be properties those expressions possess independently of the circumstances of their utterance. They are thus properties that remain constant across utterances. Let's say that the content of an utterance U is *context-dependent* iff the semantic properties of the uttered sentence do not suffice to determine that U has the content that it does. Derivatively, we might speak of a particular feature or part of the content of an utterance U as context-dependent, and mean that the semantic properties of the sentence do not suffice to determine that feature or part of U's content. We might also speak of a given linguistic expression E—or, more accurately, of the contribution to fixing content made by E—as *context-sensitive*, and mean that E's semantic properties are such as to guarantee that any sentence S to which it belongs will lack semantic properties sufficient to determine the contents of utterances of S.

In light of the considerations just mentioned, it's wholly uncontroversial that at least some kinds of context-dependence are widespread. If “contextualism” is to name an interesting and debatable thesis, it must label the view that the contents of utterances are context-dependent in ways that go beyond the familiar and uncontroversial. And indeed, that's all I will mean by the term; contextualism, for my purposes, just is the view that content is context-dependent in ways that go beyond the familiar and uncontroversial. *Invariantism*, meanwhile, is the view that contextualism, so construed, is wrong.

In the interest of a bit more specificity, however, my focus here will be on kinds of context dependence that might be thought to accrue to utterances in virtue of the predicates contained in the uttered sentences. The case of Pia illustrates this possibility. Pia's two utterances speak of the same objects. If they differ in content, the difference is in what they say to be so of those objects. And so if they differ in content, then the word “green” (or perhaps the predicate “is green”) can be used to say different things to be so of objects. But this difference doesn't appear to be traceable to ambiguity.⁷ “Green”

⁷But see forthcoming work by Chris Kennedy and Louise McNally, which argues that there is indeed a relevant ambiguity, between gradable and non-gradable senses of color terms.

does indeed have multiple meanings in English (immature, etc.), but if that is what is going on in this case, the ambiguity is one of which dictionary writers, not to mention ordinary English speakers, lack an explicit awareness. To reinforce that ambiguity is not a live option, the contextualist will typically offer multiple contrasting cases designed to suggest that the range of different things a given predicate can be used to say to be so of objects is varied and open-ended. Call the context-sensitivity in what a predicate is used to say to be so of objects that is allegedly revealed by such arguments (and hence not plausibly regarded as a matter of ambiguity) *predicate context-sensitivity*. For Travis, predicate context-sensitivity is ubiquitous. Every predicate can be used to say an open-ended array of different things to be so of objects. Other contextualists do not go quite so far. Some, indeed, restrict their attention to a single narrow class of predicates. Thus *epistemic contextualism* ascribes context-sensitivity to predicates of the form “knows that *p*” (alternatively, “is justified in believing that *p*”).

I will be challenging reasons for ascribing predicate context-sensitivity to utterances. At the same time, I don't presume to deny its existence outright. I don't want to claim, for example, that gradable adjectives never possess the kind of context-sensitivity that is traditionally theorized in terms of the idea of a contextually-determined reference class: i.e., the purported kind exemplified by such pairs as “Petra is tall [for a woman]” and “Petra is not tall [for a Northern European woman].”⁸ If what I say here is correct, then there are likely many fewer occasions for discerning predicate context-sensitivity than most contextualists believe. But my interest is not so much in gauging the extent of the phenomenon as it is in identifying and critiquing a set of assumptions and ideas that lie at the root of the arguments for

⁸Three notes: 1) I would prefer to talk of a reference kind rather than reference class, for reasons given in Fara (2000). 2) Some of the points I will be making suggest, I believe, that there are fewer occasions on which we need to posit reference-kind context-sensitivity than is often assumed, but I won't argue this claim explicitly. 3) If we treat utterances exhibiting reference-kind context-sensitivity as utterances of sentences that are elliptical for sentences or logical forms with elements referring to the reference kind—e.g., “Petra is tall for a woman”—then arguably reference-kind context-sensitivity would after all not count as predicate context-sensitivity as I have defined it. For it would not involve, e.g., “tall” being used to say different things to be so of objects; rather, “tall” as uttered would be elliptical for more complex predicates (e.g., “tall for a woman”) whose contributions needn't themselves be construed as context-sensitive (so far as the phenomenon at issue goes). For examples of early and later defenses of this general approach to reference-kind context-sensitivity in the philosophical literature, see Wheeler (1972) and Stanley (2000).

its prevalence.⁹ These assumptions and idea, in my view, have as much philosophical interest as does the semantic position they contrive to hold in place.

One other issue in these environs that claims attention in the literature but that I will not here pursue is that of the implications of predicate context-sensitivity for the project of formal, compositional, truth-conditional semantics. Insofar as our attention is restricted to ambiguity, indexicality, plausible cases of ellipsis, and related phenomena, it may seem open to domesticate context-sensitivity by treating logical-form/index pairs as the real carriers of truth conditions. On this approach, although we cannot assign properties to a sentence sufficient to determine the content of its utterance, we can assign properties to an utterance's logical form sufficient to determine how the context of the utterance will contribute to fixing the content of the utterance. The contribution of context is thus under the control of the semantics, in a sense brought out by the ease with which formal semantics can make room for indices. By contrast, it is more difficult to see how formal semantics can accommodate the alleged kinds of context-sensitivity we are about to discuss. There have been attempts to assimilate predicate context-sensitivity to, e.g., indexicality (Rothschild and Segal, ms), and ellipsis may seem an open option, but I (and others) think there is good reason to doubt these alternatives make sense for all putative species of predicate context-sensitivity. If predicate context-sensitivity is indeed incompatible with formal truth-conditional semantics as classically conceived, that of course ups the ante on the radical character of contextualism.

I will examine in this paper three lines of thought that have encouraged philosophers to discern predicate context-sensitivity in the utterances they examine, in some cases to find it more or less everywhere they look. Although I won't pursue the point here, the attitudes toward contrasting cases and other sample utterances encouraged by the lines of thought are equally amenable (though in some cases with a bit of tweaking required) to two of contextualism's chief competitors in the current literature: "subject-sensitive invariantism" (Hawthorne, 2004; Stanley, 2005) and so-called "nonindexical contextualism" (MacFarlane, 2007*a,b*).¹⁰ Like contextualism, these views proceed from an acceptance of the genuineness of the truth-value differences

⁹In an earlier version of this material, I offered a less guarded formulation of the position I proposed to defend. Martin Gustafsson (ms) rightly challenges my entitlement to the position so formulated.

¹⁰For a competitor to which these attitudes are not amenable, see Williamson (2005).

between utterances of the same sentence allegedly revealed by contrasting cases. They part company from contextualism, and from each other, over how to register those differences in semantic theory. The debates between proponents of the three views are subtle and interesting. They may also be largely moot. For the lines of reasoning that undergird their shared starting point are in error.

So at any rate, I claim. Even if I am wrong about that, it is surely worthwhile to explore some of the terrain lying under the ground on which these battles are fought.

§3. Appeals to “ordinary usage”

According to Keith DeRose (2005, p. 190), contextualism is strongly supported by “arguments from ordinary usage”. In this section, I will try to show that this claim has no merit.

Epistemic contextualism holds that the contents of utterances of a sentence of the form “S knows that p” depend upon the context in ways that go beyond any context-dependence traceable to features of the expressions substituting for “S” and “p”. Details vary, but one thought widely shared among epistemic contextualists is that the content of an assertion of “S knows that p” is such that its truth value hinges on whether S is in a position to rule out salient doubts about the truth of the proposition p (or, as it is sometimes put, salient “counter-possibilities” to p), where which doubts count as salient varies with the context of the assertion (See, e.g., Cohen, 1986, 1999, 2005; Lewis, 1999). Much of the appeal of this view for epistemologists lies in its apparent potential to defuse arguments for philosophical skepticism. If we believe that “it is only in exceptional circumstances that the utterance ‘I might be dreaming’ . . . can be understood as educing a relevant possibility” (Putnam, 2001, p. 5) for knowledge ascriptions, then granted epistemic contextualism, we can conclude that the skeptic’s educing that possibility cannot serve as a starting point for a challenge to our ordinary (i.e., non-exceptionally-circumstanced) claims to know.

When epistemologists cast as a criterion for knowing that p that you be able to rule out salient doubts about p, the presumption is that, for purposes of this criterion, you are not allowed to rule out those doubts simply on the basis of the claim that you are in a factive psychological state with the content that p—that, e.g., you see or remember (or for that matter, know) that p.

There must be some independently identifiable feature of your epistemic and cognitive situation in virtue of which you can be said to possess the doubt-ruling-out capacity; only so can its possession serve to constitute or otherwise ground your knowledge that *p*. This assumption about the structure of knowledge, shared by contextualists and their skeptical opponents alike, is questionable.¹¹ Indeed, insofar as we suspect that skeptical arguments get their force by manipulating us into a distorted understanding of our ordinary practices of offering and justifying knowledge ascriptions, I think we would do well to query this assumption, and in so doing to break with the skeptical orientation even more radically than does the contextualist.

But that is not the line I now wish to pursue. Rather, I want to press the following question: how does the contextualist know that the possibility that I might be dreaming is not a relevant possibility, not a live or salient doubt, for our ordinary claims to know things?

The obvious answer is that the contextualist notices that in ordinary life we do not in fact take such possibilities into account when evaluating knowledge claims—and that, moreover, if someone were in the course of everyday life to challenge our claim to know something on the basis of the dreaming hypothesis (or some other skeptical possibility), we would dismiss their challenge as inappropriate and bizarre. Travis writes, “What one says in speaking, on an occasion, of A’s knowledge (or ignorance) that *F* is determined by what, if anything, does count on that occasion as knowing that *F*. What so counts is what our reactions show to count” (Travis, 1989, p. 183). What our reactions show, for Travis, is that skeptical doubts are not, on the great majority of occasions for speaking of people as knowing things, “real doubts” (Travis, 1989, p. 160), not doubts the putative knower must be able to rule out in order to be correctly said to “know”.

But do all our “reactions” show this? Granted, we do not consider skeptical possibilities when offering and assessing knowledge claims in the ordinary run of life. But it is equally true—equally an undeniable empirical fact about human beings and their practices—that many people are impressed and puzzled by skeptical arguments when they are first presented with them. They cannot straightforwardly accept the skeptical conclusion, of course, but they are struck by the apparent force of the skeptical arguments. And they take those arguments to challenge precisely our ordinary, everyday claims to

¹¹The assumption is also shared by proponents of subject-sensitive invariantism. See, e.g., Hawthorne (2004).

know things. The contextualist looks at only some of our reactions to a given knowledge claim, those evident 'in the moment', as it were, while ignoring others—including our reactions when we worry over our everyday knowledge claims in light of a skeptical challenge.

Suppose Mary and Max are engaged in a joint project for which it matters whether *p*, and Max tells Mary that he knows that *p* and also how he knows that *p*—for example, he saw that *p*. It would be absurd, inappropriate and completely unproductive for Mary to challenge Max's claim to know on the ground that Max might have been dreaming when he took it that he saw that *p*. But suppose that evening over some beers, with the project satisfactorily behind them, Mary says to Max, "I'm going to argue that your earlier claim to know that *p* was mistaken." Max says, "Alright, let's see you try." Mary then takes Max through the steps of an argument for external-world skepticism. Suppose the conversation ends with Max impressed by the force of the argument, and with his acknowledging that he can't find anything wrong with it.

No doubt, there *is* something wrong with Mary's argument; the skeptical conclusion is so absurd we must assume any argument for it goes astray somewhere. What the vignette illustrates is just that there is a suspicious quickness in the contextualist's way of reaching this conclusion. The contextualist claims that "our reactions as reasonable judges" (Travis, 1989, p. 183) show what counts as a legitimate challenge to a given knowledge claim and what does not, adds to this the observation that we don't countenance anything remotely like the skeptical possibilities in evaluating knowledge claims in our day-to-day lives, and concludes by dismissing the skeptical argument. What is notable about this line is not in the ceding of authority to our reactions as reasonable judges—there is, indeed, no other conceivable source for that authority. What is notable is the contextualist's selective attention in his survey of our reactions. He ignores a whole class of such reactions, reactions that may well strike us as reasonable: namely, those we have when reflecting upon skeptical arguments.

The issue I am trying to bring out is not restricted to the contextualist treatment of knowledge ascriptions. I offer the following hypothesis: that for at least a great many of the sentences on which contextualists run contrasting-case arguments, it will be possible to construct an argument that both challenges our initial intuitions about at least one of the contrasting utterances, and strikes us as having at least some force. For example, let's reconsider the case of Pia.

Suppose you overhear Pia's first remark ("The leaves on my tree are green now"), and being in a contrary mood, decide to object. You might say something like the following. "I'll grant you, Pia, that the leaves on your tree are now painted green. But are they actually green? Certainly, some kinds of object—cars, furniture, walls—are whatever color they're painted. If you paint a wall green, what you get is a green wall. But the sorts of object in question are what philosophers call artifacts. With *natural kinds* and their parts—cats, trees, leaves, maybe even rocks—the connection between color and color painted is much more problematic. And there's a straightforward reason for this difference: the layer of paint on the surface of an artifact is, in most cases, *part* of the artifact. If you scratch the paint on a car, you scratch the car itself. But if I apply a layer of paint to my friend's dog as a practical joke, have I thereby slightly increased the mass of his dog? Certainly not. A living thing or other natural kind does not tolerate the incorporation of a layer of paint as a part. If you like, it is proscribed by the principle of unity and individuation for the kind of substance, in the Aristotelian sense, that a living thing is. And so painting your leaves green does not make the leaves themselves green. What you said was wrong."

How might Pia herself react to this argument? Obviously, she might react in a variety of different ways. She might say that it doesn't matter to her whether her utterance was really true; for her purposes, it suffices if the leaves are painted green whether that counts as their being green or not. She might grant that her utterance was false, and come to think she'd been fooling herself: what she'd really wanted was genuinely green leaves, and her painting the leaves now strikes her as a quixotic, perhaps even somewhat pathetic, attempt to achieve that.¹² She might dispute your argument, offering reasons for thinking that the color of a living thing can be a function of the color it is painted. (For example, she might argue that in painting the leaves, she has *made* them into artifacts.) Any of these reactions are imaginable. What is unlikely, at least if Pia is a relatively normal person, is that she will fail even to recognize your argument as raising an intelligible challenge to the truth of what she said, a challenge to be addressed if she

¹²I must admit I have trouble working my way into sharing the apparently widespread intuitions about the Pia example; I get hung up on the peculiarity of Pia's action. I imagine Pia with a fixed, desperate grin as she says, "That's better. The leaves on my tree are green now." I want to thank Cora Diamond for pointing out to me that painting the leaves of a living tree is perhaps not so bizarre as I have believed—for example, there is a fairly widespread practice of painting the bracts of poinsettias.

wishes to retain an entitlement to regard her original utterance as true. But insofar as she recognizes this, she acknowledges the open-endedness of the class of reactions that might be taken to discern salient or real or relevant considerations for purposes of assessing an utterance's truth.

Or consider Travis's much-discussed example concerning milk in the fridge (Travis, 1989, pp. 18–19). There is no milk in the fridge excepting a puddle at the bottom. In the first scenario, Hugo looks up from reading his newspaper to gaze meaningfully at his mug of black coffee and conspicuously fiddle with a stirring spoon. Odile says, "There's milk in the refrigerator." In the second scenario, Hugo professes to have finished cleaning the fridge. Odile looks inside it and says, "There's milk in the refrigerator." Travis claims: "though there is no ambiguity in the English words 'There is milk in the refrigerator', or none relevant to the differences between the two speakings, Odile's words in the first case said what was false, while in the second case they said what was true" (Travis, 1989, p. 19).

No doubt many people's initial intuitions about these cases accord with this assessment. But on second thought, the assessment's verdict with regard to the first scenario seems eminently debatable. One relevant consideration emerges when we consider how events might ensue after the utterance. Suppose Hugo resentfully shambles over to the fridge and exclaims, "There's no milk in here!" Odile might then point to the puddle and say, "Aha! Just as I said." Probably Hugo will be rather upset at this point, and he might well give voice to his outrage. But surely it would be odd if he were to do so by responding, "But that's not what you said!" Or if he were after all to respond that way, surely his doing so would strike a third party (perhaps a long-suffering adolescent member of the household) as at best only a peevish refusal to acknowledge the particular character of the trick Odile has played upon him—an attempt to cast Odile's original utterance as an outright lie and thus to deny its mild cleverness in trading on the irony of the milk's location.¹³

¹³Two notes: 1) In this telling of the story, I assume Odile knew at the time of her original utterance that the only milk in the fridge was in the puddle. But we can readily describe a follow-up to the utterance on the contrary assumption that equally conduces to the invariantist conclusion. 2) Predelli (2005*a*, p. 132) seems to suggest that taking an invariantist line on this example obligates one to offer a precisifying analysis of the content the two utterances are claimed to share, along the lines of, "the fridge contains a non-null amount of milk molecules." But the invariantist is no more obligated to do so than is the contextualist obligated to offering precisifying analyses of the differing contents she claims the two utterances to possess. Certainly the points I make in the text, persuasive or not,

Obviously none of this shows that contextualism about “green”-sentences or “know”-sentences or “milk in the fridge”-sentences is false. So far I have tried to make plausible two points. First, I am trying to bring out that intuitions about truth-value difference elicited by the presentation of contrasting-case arguments of the sort favored by Travis and epistemic contextualists are precisely not intuitions that we should take for granted as guides to the reality of the matter. For on further reflection, there emerge all kinds of credible challenges to these intuitions, drawing on a range of different sorts of consideration. (The challenges I have raised are only the tip of the iceberg.) This ought to be particularly obvious with respect to knowledge ascriptions, for there is a long and extremely impressive intellectual tradition (as there is not in the case of remarks on leaf color or beverages in the fridge) dedicated to challenging those very intuitions. Travis, on behalf of epistemic contextualism, responds to this tradition by insisting on a methodological principle that might be put as follows: take seriously the reactions of ordinary speakers for purposes of gauging what bears upon an utterance’s truth value. My second point has been that this principle buys the contextualist nothing, for ordinary speakers can be brought to take seriously challenges to the intuitions. There is nothing unordinary about having second thoughts. We need some particular reason for limiting our focus to speakers’ ‘first thoughts’, as it were, for purposes of assessing “ordinary usage”. (I will shortly consider one putative reason for doing so.)

At this juncture it might be tempting to object on behalf of the contextualist that even if, say, Pia, is moved by your argument to say, “You’re right. The leaves on my tree aren’t green,” or Max is moved by Mary’s argument to say, “You’re right. I didn’t know that p,” it doesn’t follow that Pia or Max are contradicting their original assertions. For in offering these arguments, you and Mary have changed the context, in such a way that utterances of the sentences at issue now say something different than did the original utterances.

There are three points to be made about this response. First, the response begs the present question. I am challenging a certain way of arguing for contextualism. The response now at issue says that if contextualism is true, then my challenge fails. But it is bootless to defend arguments for contextualism on the assumption that contextualism is true. The issue is not

do not depend upon their intelligibility for the thought that any such analysis waits in the wings.

whether contextualism could in principle cope with the data; the question is whether the way of arguing for contextualism at issue carries independent authority.

Second, the claim that Pia and Max are not contradicting their earlier utterances with their later utterances is strikingly at odds with our ordinary judgments on this matter. Pia and Max themselves, for example, will surely believe that they are repudiating their previous stances. Contextualists often point out that they are not committed to a view that, in application to the current case, would render it true for Max to say to Mary, “Now that you’ve presented your skeptical argument, I don’t know that p. But I did know that p when I made the earlier utterance.”¹⁴ For if the presentation of the skeptical argument has generated a discursive context in which the epistemic standards relevant for determining the truth value of utterances ascribing knowledge are so high that Max can’t truly say, “I know that p,” then he equally can’t truly say, “I knew that p” (DeRose, 1992, pp. 924–925). But contextualists tend not to acknowledge—because they can’t consistently acknowledge—that it would be equally opposed to our ordinary patterns of discourse for Max to say, “I didn’t know that p. But in saying that, I don’t contradict what I earlier said in saying, ‘I know that p.’”¹⁵ Recall that Mary presented her argument as challenging Max’s earlier claim. Such was a perfectly intelligible move on her part; indeed, philosophical skeptics almost always, implicitly or explicitly, present their arguments as challenging ordinary claims to know. If Max concedes that he cannot find anything wrong with the argument, then, unless he is confused, he will concede that he cannot find a way to defend his earlier claim to know against it.

The larger point here is that we tend to be open to criticisms of our assertions that do not respect such standards of use and application as might be read off from our first thoughts, our immediate intuitions, about the truth conditions of that utterance. And in light of this feature of them, there is ground for the suggestion that our ordinary reactions and judgments embody a commitment to a view that may be put imagistically as follows: when a

¹⁴The original source of the objection that epistemic contextualists (more accurately, their ancestors, “relevant alternative” theorists) are committed to such a view is Yourgrau (1983, pp. 182–183).

¹⁵DeRose (1992, pp. 926ff) contrives to portray a remark in this vein as acceptable by describing an exchange in a courtroom setting, thereby tacitly taking advantage of the tendency, in that setting, for talk of “contradicting” one’s earlier testimony to connote dishonesty or unreliability of memory.

person makes an assertion by uttering some words of a natural language—say, English—the words she has uttered go out on the common marketplace. That is to say, they inscribe a claim that is in principle open for assessment by any English speaker who hears of them, no matter how far-flung, no matter how distant from the original discursive context.¹⁶ As David Wiggins puts a closely related thought, in arguing for what he calls the “autonomy” of natural languages (as against attempts to theoretically downplay natural languages in favor of appeals to Gricean communication-intentions), a speaker does not aim merely at “being understood . . . by an audience as wanting to communicate that such and such”; he aims at “going on record to that effect” (Wiggins, 1997*a*, p. 504). I take it the idea here articulated is that we natural-language speakers suppose that the words of our language are apt, all by themselves, for providing the content of a claim, and that in uttering them assertively, we aim to help ourselves to that expressive power—to let our words do the talking, as it were. A similar idea is also part of what is at stake for John McDowell when he speaks of a natural language as a “repository of tradition” (McDowell, 1994, p. 126). He writes, for example, that we ought not “to abandon the thought that the primary form of the ability to mean something by verbal behavior is the ability to mean what one’s words mean, independently of the particularity of one’s communicative situation—that is, what they mean in the language, in the ordinary sense, that one is learning to speak” (McDowell, 2002, p. 187). If our ordinary reactions do embody a commitment to such a vision of natural language (and I recognize that a satisfactory account of that vision would require more explanation than I here provide), then, in light of the commandment to respect ordinary reactions in philosophical reflection on language, this ought, at the very least, to serve as a countervailing force to whatever pressures there might seem to be pushing us toward contextualist interpretations of the contents of utterances.¹⁷

¹⁶This view is perfectly consistent with allowing that it is often of crucial importance, for understanding a claim, to know something about the purpose for which and the basis on which the claim was put forth.

¹⁷A further reason to find such a commitment at work in our ordinary linguistic practice is the presumption, arguably in evidence in that practice, that adjusting for indexicality, tense and the like, we can correctly report what someone said on an earlier occasion with a “that”-clause that simply repeats the sentence originally uttered. In an ancestor of this paper, I called this the *homophonic report principle* and argued for its aptness as a characterization of ordinary practice. Gustafsson (ms) criticizes these arguments and arguments to similar effect in Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

A contextualist might protest that, to the extent that I have identified genuine tendencies in how people treat their own and others' utterances, these tendencies are ways in which we go astray in our treatment of these utterances. If it is true that we are always prepared to entertain second thoughts about the truth conditions of utterances, this just shows how impressionable, dishonest, sloppy or lazy we are in failing to keep in view the local discursive contexts to which the contents of our utterances are in fact attuned. If it is true that we find ourselves moved by skeptical arguments and other considerations that have no practical implications for the purposes and aims served by our knowledge claims in daily life, this just shows how easily we can be mystified by those who ignore the contextualist character of truth conditions. And so on. But to adopt this response amounts to situating contextualism as an error theory of a large range of our ordinary reactions to, and treatment of, the things people say. To cast contextualism as a platform for the critique (and perhaps correction and reform) of ordinary reactions sits very uneasily with contextualism's alleged distinctive fidelity to ordinary reactions.

The third and final point is that there is a real danger for the contextualist in claiming that the very process of raising doubts putatively addressed to the sorts of utterances on which they wish to run contrasting cases serves to change the context in such a way as to prevent the doubts from hitting home. Taking this claim seriously raises the specter that the initial intuitions the doubts mean to target are in fact untestable. For as soon as we attempt to subject the intuitions to real scrutiny, the very process of doing so changes the subject. We needn't accept everything John Rawls has to say in support of the ideal of reflective equilibrium to see the force of the thought that intuitive reactions to particular cases are guides to truth only insofar as they are open to scrutiny from the standpoint of other reactions and judgments on our part (See Rawls, 1971, 1993). The response at issue thus threatens to undermine an allegedly key source of contextualism's support.¹⁸

¹⁸For a contrasting outlook, see Predelli (2005*b*). Predelli rejects contextualism on certain semantic-theoretical grounds. But he dismisses attempts to question intuitions about the truth values of utterances like Pia's with the following remarkable assertion: "Discussion of one's intuitions are rarely profitable: those who find it plausible to conclude that, upon closer scrutiny, [the contrasting utterances] are both true (or both false) with respect to the way things are with Pia's plant, are unlikely to be interested in the contextualist challenge in the first place" (Predelli, 2005*b*, 358–359). Certainly it is "rarely profitable" to just counter someone's intuitions with opposing, equally unexamined, intuitions. But

I have argued that the policy of taking seriously the reactions of ordinary speakers for purposes of gauging what bears upon an utterance's truth value does not legitimate the contextualist's way of arguing for contextualism, with its dependence on a credulity about our initial intuitions of truth-value difference. But suppose we could find a basis for endorsing a more restrictive policy: to take seriously the immediate intuitions of speakers about the considerations relevant to the truth values of given utterances, but to discount any intuitions or judgments that might be elicited by further scrutiny or reflection on what the utterances say to be so. I have just in effect offered a reason for thinking such a policy might be self-defeating. But suppose nonetheless we took ourselves to have a ground for its adoption. This would be an obvious boon for contextualism, because it is precisely the second thoughts elicited by further scrutiny that give it trouble.

DeRose sees this point clearly:

A certain methodology strongly favours contextualism. This 'methodology of the straightforward', as we may call it, takes very seriously the simple positive and negative claims speakers make utilizing the piece of language being studied, and puts a very high priority on making those natural and appropriate straightforward uses come out true, at least when that use is not based on some false belief the speaker has about some underlying matter of fact. Relatively little emphasis is then put on somewhat more complex matters, like what meta-linguistic claims speakers will make and how we tend to judge how the content of one claim compares with another (e.g., whether one claim contradicts another). This methodology favours a contextualist conclusion, because, as I have been urging here, the data concerning what simple positive and negative claims we make involving 'knows' do strongly support contextualism, and considerations coming from the other, fancier, sources do not seem as kind to contextualism. (DeRose, 2005, pp. 192–193).¹⁹

if there is no distinction to be drawn between that unproductive activity and the enterprise of subjecting intuitions to "closer scrutiny", for example by arguing against them, philosophy, not to mention rational discourse as such, is in trouble. Philosophy is also in trouble if taking a view to be based on dubious intuitions entails that one is "unlikely to be interested" in that view.

¹⁹DeRose believes that, despite appearances, the "fancier" consideration don't actually

In the same spirit, DeRose (2005, p. 190) suggests that contextualism is supported by “arguments from ordinary usage—appeals to what speakers of a language do or would say in applying the terms in question to particular situations (both positive and negative claims involving the term), appeals to which simple applications are or would be proper or improper for them to make, and appeals to intuitions as to the truth-values of those claims in particular situations”.

But other than a desire to promote contextualism, what reason could there be to follow the “methodology of the straightforward”, to give distinctive weight to “arguments from ordinary usage”, with “ordinary usage” understood so as to overlook the “fancier” reactions and judgments that I have suggested are in fact no less ordinary than anything else? As DeRose sees it, such a policy is underwritten by a natural view of the relationship between usage and meaning. He asks us to consider the “crazed theory” that “a necessary condition for the truth of ‘S is a physician’ is that S be able to cure any conceivable illness instantaneously” (DeRose, 2005, p. 190). This ‘theory’ is obviously wrong, but, DeRose asks, “in virtue of what is our language in fact such that” it is wrong? He answers the question thusly:

[I]t seems eminently reasonable to suppose that such facts as these, regarding our use, in thought and speech, of the term ‘physician’, are centrally involved: that we take to be physicians many licensed practitioners of medicine who don’t satisfy the demanding requirement alleged; that we seriously describe these people as being ‘physicians’; that we don’t deny that these people are ‘physicians’; that claims to the effect that these people are ‘physicians’ intuitively strike us as true; etc. It’s no doubt largely in virtue of such facts as these that the traditional view, rather than the bizarre conjectures we are considering, is true of our language: the correctness of the traditional view largely consists in such facts (DeRose, 2005, p. 191).

We are justified in taking the intuitions, reactions and simple uses cited by “arguments from ordinary usage” to reveal the truth conditions of utterances and sentences, then, because those intuitions, reactions and uses in large measure *constitute* our utterances and sentences having the truth conditions

_____ speak against his contextualist account. I’ve been arguing that he’s wrong about that, but that’s not the issue I want to pursue now.

that they do. In particular, “such facts about ordinary usage . . . provide us with our primary, most important and best evidence” for the context-sensitivity of given terms because those facts “are also that in which the context-sensitivity of those terms consists” (DeRose, 2005, p. 191). Applying the point to the predicate that interests him the most, DeRose concludes:

‘Knows’ is context-sensitive . . . largely because speakers in some contexts do (in fact, with propriety, and with apparent truth) seriously describes subjects as ‘knowing’ propositions when those subjects meet certain moderate epistemic standards with respect to the propositions in question, even if they don’t meet still higher epistemic standards, but, in other contexts, will go so far as to (in fact, with propriety, and with apparent truth) seriously deny that such subjects ‘know’ such things, reserving the ascription of ‘knowledge’ only for subjects that meet some more demanding epistemic standard’. (DeRose, 2005, p. 191)

I will (with obvious prejudice) call DeRose’s view of the constitutive role played simple intuitions, reactions and uses in determining the truth conditions of utterances the *superficial use-theory*.²⁰

Compelling grounds for rejecting the superficial use-theory have been generally available at least since Putnam (1975*a,b*) drew attention to certain features of natural-kind terms. Putnam pointed out that members of the

²⁰A very similar idea is deployed by Raffman (1994), Shapiro (2006), and others to defend a contextualist account of vagueness. These theorists begin with the observation that in a borderline case of the application of a vague predicate *P*, one is typically free to take the item in question to belong to the extension of *P* or not, without, in Shapiro’s words, “offending against the meanings of the terms or against any other rule of language use” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 10). They couple to this observation the claim, à la DeRose, that in a borderline case of the application of a vague predicate, whether the item in question falls into the extension of *P* is “determined” by whether “competent speakers would judge it” to so fall (Shapiro, 2006, pp. 38–40). They then argue that these two points together have the implication that when one, say, judges a borderline case *a* of *P* to fall into *P*’s extension, one thereby generates a context (possibly quite short-lived) in which *a* does fall into the extensions of *P*. The doubts raised in the text about the superficial use-theory apply equally to the view of the relationship between extension and judgments at work here. (The contextualists about vagueness have the added problem that their initial observation seems off-key. Surely we do not typically take it as appropriate, in a borderline case of, say, baldness to either straightforwardly give out that the man in question is bald or straightforwardly give out that he is not. Rather, we take it that we ought to withhold judgment, or say that it’s unclear, or some such.)

extension of a natural-kind term *F* needn't fit the 'stereotype' associated with that term—i.e., the constellation of observable characteristics an ordinary speaker of the language associates with *F*. Membership in the extension thus cannot be a function of conformity to this stereotype. What members of the extension share is rather an underlying nature, which can be fully described and explained only in the vocabulary of some natural science—but which needn't actually have been thus described and explained by anyone at the time that *F* is in currency.²¹ These features are impossible to square with the view that *F*'s extension is determined by ordinary speakers' intuitions and reactions concerning which utterances of the form, *S* is *F*, are true. Such intuitions may reflect only the stereotype we associate with *F*, which in turn corresponds at best loosely with the term's actual extension.

Putnam's account is perfectly compatible with the principle that use determines meaning. There may be a temptation to suppose otherwise, based on a thought to the effect that any extension-determining meaning we can 'give' to an expression, through our uses, reactions, dispositions, or intentions, must be such that we are in a position to adjudicate membership in that extension. But this sort of proto-verificationist thought at best reflects a failure of imagination. So long as we possess, at least implicitly, the concept of a natural kind, and so long as we are in a position to draw attention to exemplars of a given natural kind (for example, demonstratively), we are perfectly capable of 'giving' an expression a meaning such that it stands for that natural kind construed on Putnamian lines. Indeed, there is nothing to prevent us from doing so explicitly and intentionally: consider "Let '*F*' stand for *that* [natural] kind of thing" said while pointing at some instances thereof, a definition that certainly might be misunderstood, but then again, might not.

At the same time, Putnam's account is frequently characterized as portraying the meaning of a natural-kind term as 'world-involving' or 'extension-involving', and these descriptions are apt. For on this account, if we set about to answer in any meaningful detail a DeRose-type question about "in virtue

²¹Note that this idea does not require assuming that we have an independent grasp of what constitutes a "natural-scientific" vocabulary. I would argue that a natural science is in part constituted as such in virtue of its being in the business of elucidating the underlying natures of natural kinds. This circularity would be vicious only if there were not a great deal to be said, at both the general level and in the case of specific natural sciences, about how this activity fits in with the practice of natural science more generally. (For a very small contribution to this topic, see Bridges (2006).)

of what our language is such that” a natural-kind term has the particular extension that it does, we will quickly find our investigation shifting from an analysis of the relevant bits of language to consideration of the natural kind itself. What facts about speakers of English, about their usages, intentions, reactions and so forth, determine is no more or less than this: that the English word “lemon” speaks of lemons. If, knowing this fact, we still have residual questions about the constitution of the extension of “lemon”—e.g., about why *this* object (which is green) should fall into that extension but *that* object (which is a Meyer lemon) should not—then these are questions about what it is to be a lemon, which is to say, questions for plant biologists, not for field observers of ordinary language use.

These points, at a suitable level of abstraction, generalize beyond the case of natural-kind terms. Consider DeRose’s example of “physician”. In our culture at the present time, there is an extremely complicated set of social institutions surrounding the practice of medicine. There are institutions involved in training physicians, in providing them with support, space and equipment, in overseeing their treatment of patients, in managing payment for their work, in orchestrating their collaborative endeavors, and so on. Inextricably entwined with all of this are rules and procedures for credentialing physicians. Physician-hood is about as thoroughly institutionalized a status as it is nowadays possible to achieve. Anyone who claims to be a physician while lacking the ordinary licenses, degrees and affiliations had better have some very special reasons for that claim if it is to have a chance at being true. The same goes for anyone who would deny that a person with the requisite licenses, degrees and affiliations is a physician. Ordinary speakers can be expected to differ in the extent to which they are familiar with the ins and outs of the credentialing and related procedures, and hence, for their intuitions about the application of the word “physician” in particular cases to correspond to the relevant facts about the practice.

Again, there may be an inclination to protest that our words have only the meanings that we give to them, and it must therefore be ‘up to us’ whether a given object falls into the extension of a given word. And no doubt, there is some sense in which this claim is true. But in whatever sense it is true, it cannot conflict with the evident fact that we are often interested in kinds in the world around us whose natures we imperfectly understand, and hence whose boundaries we can individuate at best imperfectly. Given our interest in these kinds, it is natural that we should have words for speaking of them. We must then in some sense or another ‘give’ words meanings

suitable for so speaking of them, and intuitions and dispositions on our part, as well as descriptive conditions in our possession, will certainly play a role in constituting their possession of such meanings. But in giving words meanings suitable for speaking of such kinds, we allow facts about the kinds themselves to determine appropriate extensions. The superficial use-theory rests on a failure to see this possibility—indeed necessity—and hence on a superficial vision of the ways in which our words engage the world of which they speak.

If the superficial use-theory is misguided, it cannot provide any help in licensing the “methodology of the straightforward”. DeRose believes that we should treat what I have called our ‘first thoughts’ about the application of “know” as a guide to the truth conditions of “know”-claims because these first thoughts are the material out of which the contents of those claims are constituted. Centuries of second thoughts about our first thoughts about these claims would seem to bely the existence of any such straightforward constitutive connection. But DeRose believes that an attractive conception of the relationship between meaning and use, one that gains support from reflection on examples that do not relevantly involve context-sensitivity, should give us faith in the connection. I have argued that the conception will seem to be supported by the examples only given a simplistic and distorted accounting of the relevant phenomena. The upshot is that we are left with no reason to endorse the “methodology of the straightforward”.

§4. Content, standard and point

In a recent defense of contextualism, Mark Richard (2004) offers the English word “rich”, in the sense in which it is roughly synonymous with “wealthy” or “affluent”, as an example of a word whose contributions to the truth-conditions of utterances introduces a high degree of predicate context-sensitivity. Richard takes it as obvious that “rich” has this character; he writes, “It is, I think, beyond serious dispute that the truth conditions of [a sentence like] ‘Mary is rich’ vary across contexts, as vary the interest, focus, and so on of participants in a conversation” (Richard, 2004, p. 219). Richard imagines two acquaintances of Mary, Naomi and Didi, who have each just learned that Mary has won a million U.S. dollars in the lottery. Didi is impressed by Mary’s windfall, and says to her friend, “Mary is rich.” Whereas Naomi, who moves in more rarified circles, says to her friend, “Mary is not rich at all.” According to Richard, both Naomi and Didi have probably spo-

ken the truth: “it is very plausible that the truth of their claims about wealth turns on whatever standards prevail within their conversations” (Richard, 2004, p. 218).²²

To say that different “standards prevail within their conversations” is presumably at least to say that Didi and her audience on the one hand, and Naomi and her audience on the other, are disposed to make and assess utterances about who counts as rich in ways that map onto different standards for counting as rich. It may perhaps suggest as well that having one’s utterances, and reactions to utterances, accord with the respective standards is a social norm for the participants to the respective conversations, such that utterances that reflect competing standards would meet with disapproval. Finally, it may also be meant to suggest that the parties to the two conversations rely on the respective conversationally-prevailing standards in forming the judgments they then express with utterances containing the term “rich”. This last thought would need to be treated carefully: in particular, we would need to avoid the naïve assumption that people always form such judgments on the basis of general and non-circularly specifiable criteria for being rich.

Let’s grant that different standards prevail, in these senses, in the two conversations. But why should a difference in the conversationally-prevailing standards for application of “rich” generate a corresponding difference in what is said to be so of a person in characterizing her as “rich”? Richard doesn’t offer much of an answer to this question, presumably because he takes the existence of such a link to be “beyond serious dispute”. But it is not difficult to guess the line of thought at work. Richard suggests that prevailing standards will correspond to “the interests, focus, and so on of participants in a conversation”. And he further suggests that the stringency of the standards will be a function of the level of affluence of the participants; and so for example he offers in explanation of the stringency of the standards

²²Richard stipulates that Naomi and Didi measure Mary’s wealth against the same reference class, namely, New Yorkers (Richard, 2004, p. 220). The point of this stipulation is that Richard wants to claim that the contextual variability brought to the table by “rich” goes beyond that which might be accounted for by treating occurrences of “rich” as elliptical for phrases specifying a reference class, e.g., “rich for a New Yorker”, “rich for an Upper-East-Sider”. It strikes me as an oddly gratuitous stipulation, however. In my own experience, I rarely if ever interpret utterances about who is “rich” or not as referenced to a class whose boundaries are constituted by the city or town to which the speaker (or subject) belongs. Had Richard stipulated that the relevant reference class was all Americans, that would perhaps not sound such a false note. But in fact, I believe that in most cases in ordinary discourse we needn’t suppose there is any reference class at all.

at work in Naomi's conversation the fact that for Naomi, "a million dollars is not really all that much" (Richard, 2004, p. 218). These claims are extremely plausible. And they might seem to suggest the following thought: that different standards prevail within the two conversations because Naomi's peer group and Didi's peer group have different classificatory interests. In particular, their differing employments of the word, "rich", flow from the fact that it is useful to Naomi and her peers to draw a distinction among degrees of wealth such that Mary does not fall into the top category, and it is useful to Didi and her peers to draw a distinction in which she does. The reason for this difference is that the people Naomi and her peers know or are otherwise interested in tend to be a lot wealthier than the people Didi and her peers are concerned with. And so if "rich" vs. "not rich" is to mark a *taxonomically useful* distinction in the respective social worlds of Naomi and Didi, they must locate the distinction in different places. We can see this line of thought emerging in Richard's suggestion that the contextualist interpretation is "especially" plausible if "each remark is part of a longer conversation (with Naomi assessing various people she and her friend know for wealth, Didi doing the same)" (Richard, 2004, p. 218).

The underlying principle at work here is elegantly stated by Travis in the following passage:

If the driving idea here were put into a slogan, it might be this: Content is inseparable from point. What is communicated in *our* words lies, inseparably, in what we would expect of them. How our words represent things is a matter of, and not detachable from, their (recognizable) import for our lives. Calling something (such as my car) blue places it (on most uses) within one or another system of categories: blue, and not red, or green; blue, and not turquoise or chartreuse; etc. If I call my car blue, the question arises what the point would be, on that occasion, of so placing it; or, again, what one might reasonably expect the point to be; what ought one to be able to do with the information that the car so classifies. What I in fact said in calling my car blue is not then fixed independent of the answers to such questions. (Travis, 2006, p. 33)

For Travis, what Pia says, in calling her leaves green—or what Naomi says, in calling Mary rich—is "not fixed independent" of the answers to

questions about what “the point would be”, or “what one might reasonably expect the point to be”, in Pia (Naomi) calling the leaves (Mary) green (rich) on this or that understanding of the “system of categories” in which her utterance thereby places the item(s) in question. For Travis, and I think we can say for Richard as well, it is this principle that encourages interpreting utterances like Naomi’s about Mary, or Pia’s about the leaves, in such a way that the truth value of the utterances are to be judged on the basis of the standards prevailing in the relevant conversations. The minor premise mediating this inference is that a proper understanding of the point of the utterance in question will show that the system of categories that matters for the utterance’s classificatory work is, precisely, the system of categories demarcated by those very standards.

I will grant for purposes of argument the principle that the content of an utterance is constitutively dependent upon its point. Call this the *point-content principle*. The questions I wish to press concern rather the minor premises that are needed, in each case, to get us from the point-content principle to the contextualist conclusion that the content of an utterance co-varies with the conversationally prevailing standards of application of its predicates. That is to say, they are questions about the points of given utterances. Now, Travis offers no precise account here, or anywhere, of the features of an utterance’s context that determine its point. But it is evident from his treatment of Pia’s remarks on her leaves, as well as from the many other cases to the same effect discussed throughout his work, that he shares Richard’s perception that the point of an utterance is likely to have something to do with the interests and focus of the conversational participants. I don’t propose to challenge that thought either, thus vaguely formulated. I want to suggest rather that the contextualists’ assumptions about the points of given utterances betray an enfeebled vision of what the interests and focus of participants in a discourse might be.

Consider the following case. Chester and I are trying to get a small business going in the field of children’s-pajama design. Today we are experimenting with materials. As it happens, we are both uninformed on matters of common-sense physics. So we have a conversation in which the governing standard for a material’s counting as “flammable” is whether it would catch fire when placed on a hot radiator. I say, “Thin, loosely-woven cotton is not flammable”. Meanwhile Tucker, engaged elsewhere in a conversation with different standards in play, says, “Thin, loosely-woven cotton is flammable”. I take it that even the most jaded contextualist will agree that, intuitively,

we do not both speak the truth. In particular, I speak the false. But I do not speak the false in virtue of conflicting with locally prevailing conversational standards for the application of “flammable”. Rather I speak the false in virtue of *according* with those standards. The problem is with the standards themselves.

This example need not be taken as a counterexample to the point-content principle. But if we do not want to regard it as such, we must then take it as a counterexample to the minor premise that would be needed in this case to get us from the principle to the contextualist conclusion. We must then deny that the system of categories that matters, given the point of my utterance, is the system of categories corresponding to the prevailing conversational standards for “flammable”. And this is not after all an implausible claim. For what interests of Chester and myself are at stake in this conversation? We are interested in designing marketable pajamas. We are interested in avoiding massive lawsuits. And so on. These shared interests strongly suggest that the point of my utterance is to locate thin, loosely-woven cotton in a system of categories that may or may not be isomorphic to the system of categories determined by prevailing conversational standards for application of “flammable” and in any case is fixed independently of it. An invariantist will want to say that this system of categories is none other than that of the flammable and the not flammable. A contextualist need not object to this characterization; but insofar as she wants to apply contextualism to all predicates (like Travis) or at least to all gradable adjectives (like Richard), she will insist that what the invariantist says in putting matters thusly is determined by the context of his own utterance. To avoid potential confusion, I will put the matter more neutrally. Given my and Chester’s interests, the point of my utterance is to locate the fabric at issue in a certain system of categories which has the following feature: it is the very system of categories in which other utterances characterizing fabrics as “flammable” or “not flammable”, utterances made by other people on other occasions (such as perhaps by Tucker), thereby locate those fabrics. For it is only so interpreted that my utterance is to the point given our interests in producing marketable pajamas and avoiding lawsuits.

The moral is that there is no inevitability in the transition from the premises that the content of an utterance depends upon its point, and that its point depends upon such things as the interests of the parties to the utterance, to the conclusion that the content ought to be interpreted as tied to local conversational standards. Those very premises may equally push us

toward an interpretation in which the content floats free of those standards, and in which, if the content is usefully conceived as tied to any standards at all, then those will be standards enacted by a larger discursive context. But how often will that be so? And how are we to decide?

Let's return to "rich". And let's revisit the following question: why do wealthy people draw the category of the "rich" more narrowly than do non-rich people? (I will usually say "wealthy", "well-off", etc., in speaking of rich people to avoid an illusory but nonetheless potentially distracting appearance of question-begging.) For ease of exposition, let's call the stringent standards of application for "rich" that, by hypothesis, prevail in the conversations of well-off people *H-standards* ("H" standing for "high"). It doesn't matter exactly what these standards are, how best to specify them, or to what extent they are vague or indeterminate; what matters is just that they are standards that do not typically prevail outside conversations of the well-off. Now, our question is: what is it about the interests and focus of the well-off that explains why H-standards govern their use of "rich"? We've already bruited one possible answer to this question, suggested by Richard's and Travis's remarks: the well-off have a taxonomic stake in effecting a classification that divides other well-off people, the people that constitute their social world and hence who tend to claim their attention, into two non-empty, indeed reasonably well-filled, categories. This hypothesis conduces, via the content-point hypothesis, to a picture of the point of their applications of "rich" and "not rich" that favors the contextualist view that the contents of utterances employing that predicate vary with local discursive standards for its application.

But there are other possible explanations of the prevalence of H-standards based in plausible hypotheses about the interests and focus of the well-off. I will discuss two such explanations, and I will do so in a fair bit of detail. The point of this exercise is to suggest that some attentiveness to social and psychological phenomena that are well-documented in other disciplinary environs casts serious doubt on Richard's presumptions (and by extension the presumptions implicit in contrasting-case arguments for contextualism) about what is "beyond serious dispute".

The first hypothesis is that well-off people want to resist characterizing themselves as "rich", and so apply that term in accordance with standards that leave them out of its extension. One reason for that desire is that it helps support a self-conception on the part of the well-off person as a salt-of-the-earth common man/woman. In *Richistan*, an illuminating recent

examination of the “parallel country of the rich”, Wall Street Journal writer Thomas Frank, observes that “The newly wealthy . . . love to say that they’re simple middle-class people” (Frank, 2007*a*, p. 25).²³ Frank quotes the head of a butler training and placement company giving an example of the “faux populism” Frank takes this self-classification to reflect: “I got there and this couple said, ‘We’re really simple, causal people. We just need someone to do a little cooking and cleaning.’ Well, the wife . . . [is] wearing all Chanel and Burberry. They have Masters’ art all over the walls, they have a lap pool in the basement with palm trees and a 5,000-bottle wine cellar. . . . Nothing was simple or casual about their life” (Frank, 2007*a*, p. 25).

A second reason the wealthy may have for wanting to think of themselves as “middle class” rather than “rich” is that it can help to rationalize resentment of a tax scheme that makes large demands upon them. If I’m not rich, then isn’t it unfair that I be taxed heavily? And indeed, Americans with a household net worth between \$1 million to \$10 million are politically conservative in general and to tend in particular to favor tax policy that reduces burdens upon them (Frank, 2007*a*, pp. 8–9). They are, for example, “strong advocates of abolishing the estate tax” (Frank, 2007*a*, p. 9). Financial writer Jane Bryant Quinn (2000), discussing the objections she received to a column arguing against the abolition of the estate tax, notes that one of the most common responses was: “I’m not rich. A million dollars doesn’t mean anything today.” (Her counter-response: “Hmmm. It would mean a lot to the 98 percent of Americans who don’t have it.”) By far the most successful tactic of the movement to repeal the estate tax was to promulgate anecdotes (invariably untrue, as it happens) of individuals who were not “rich” but nonetheless facing familial financial ruin in the face of the tax (Graetz, Gresh and Shapiro, 2005, chapter 7).²⁴

²³That claim is backed up by Prince and Schiff (2008, p. 52), who report that every participant in their large survey of those with a household net worth of \$1 million to \$10 million categorized themselves either as “upper-middle-class” (67%) or “middle-class” (33%). Prince and Schiff believe that the existence of a class of affluent Americans who regard themselves as middle class is a new and startling phenomenon that upends many assumptions about class in the United States. But the tendency of Americans across the spectrum of wealth to think of themselves as middle class is old news; a study conducted in 1941 by Princeton’s Office of Public Opinion Research concluded that 88% (+/- 5%) of Americans self-identified as middle class (Cantril, 1943).

²⁴Of course, as one climbs up the wealth ladder to \$10 million and beyond, it becomes harder and harder to support a “simple middle-class” view of oneself. In light of the mechanism just posited, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that those worth greater than

Suppose we take it that a well-off person's stringent standards for application of "rich" flow from interests that are served by her being able to say of herself in particular that she is "not rich", and that those interests include the two just mentioned. The first interest is to motivate a self-conception that Frank characterizes as that of a "simple middle-class" person. Now, if what a person says of herself, in saying, e.g., "I'm not rich", serves only to deny herself membership in a category whose boundaries are determined by H-standards for the application of "rich", then it is very hard to see how her remark could serve to ratify or express that self-conception. She could validly infer "I'm middle-class" from "I'm not rich", with the latter interpreted in terms of H-standards, only on a correspondingly inflated understanding of the upper boundary of the category labeled by "middle-class". But Frank's characterization of the self-conception he has in mind is obviously meant to draw on the positive ideas about the middle-class articulated in public discourse, the discourse engaged in by a politician when she says, e.g., "I believe that the middle class is the backbone of our economy . . . and the guarantor of the American Dream. America is only as strong as our middle class" (Hillary Clinton for President, 2007). And so insofar as we seek to interpret the wealthy person's utterance of "I'm not rich" in a way that takes into account the point of that utterance, and insofar as we conceive that point as at least in part to serve the interest of underwriting the self-conception Frank describes, we ought to interpret that utterance as speaking of the categories at stake in these larger social and political discourses about wealth, the middle class, and so on.

Just the same goes for the second posited interest: justifying opposition to taxation. In offering, "I'm not rich," as a reason to oppose the estate tax as it was then configured, Quinn's correspondents intended to make an intelligible contribution to the public debate over the estate tax. If we are to interpret them as doing so, then we ought to understand "rich" on their

\$10 million tend to favor progressive tax policy more than do those in the \$1 million to \$10 million range. Indeed, according to Frank, "Most Middle Richistanis [i.e., those with a household net worth between \$10 million and \$100 million] voted for John Kerry in the [2004] election, even though they said Mr. Bush would be better for their personal financial situation" (Frank, 2007a, p. 10). But the super-rich may have their own reasons for wanting to cast the affluent-but-not-super-rich out of the category of the "rich". Most notably, there is the pleasure of exclusivity. Again, Frank: "Many Richistanis . . . refer to the Lowers [i.e., \$1 to \$10 million] as 'affluent'—the ultimate Richistani insult. In the words of Andrew Carnegie, that great Richistani patriarch, Lower Richistanis represent 'not wealth, but only competence'" (Frank, 2007a, p. 9).

lips as saying of people the same thing it says of people in the context of public debate over tax policy. Otherwise we must treat these utterances as equivocations. Interestingly, Quinn reports her correspondents as defending their assertion on the ground of another assertion that is arguably context-dependent: among other things, we don't know what an utterance of "A million dollars doesn't mean anything today" is saying to be so unless we know the domain over which the quantifier ranges. A contextualist will presumably wish to hold that the truth conditions of utterances of this sentence vary in accordance with prevailing conversational standards, so that an utterance of it by a rich person might be true on the ground that, e.g., having a million dollars doesn't mean the ability to buy a home in the Upper East Side, a large personal support staff, or a Gulfstream. But in the context of the public debate over the estate tax, the utterance, so interpreted, would be near-farcical in its irrelevance. Quinn, quite reasonably, interprets the utterance in such a way that her counter response is well-taken.

To be quite explicit, I'm suggesting that to the extent that we see the interests I've identified as helping to determine the point of a well-off person's utterances about who is "rich" and who is "not rich", then the point-content principle gives us excellent grounds to interpret the content of those utterances, à la my use of "flammable", in such a way that those utterances would not amount to equivocations when conceived as contributions to certain familiar discourses in which "rich" is often deployed. The set of familiar discourses in question belong to what we can helpfully call *public discourse* about wealth, which encompasses, among other things, the widely disseminated writings and utterances of members of old and new media, politicians, and the chattering classes; the endless parade of best-selling business and personal-finance how-to books (e.g., *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*); the reported remarks of citizens (e.g., 'man on the street' interviews), published surveys, etc. Public discourse about wealth is utterly pervasive in America, and in that discourse "rich" is a key term. H-standards for application of "rich" do not prevail in public discourse.²⁵ And so if a well-off person's utterance of

²⁵That is true by stipulation: to get the appropriate contrasting cases, the contextualist needs the H-standards to be more or less special to the conversations of the well-off. But the contextualist's stipulation is well-motivated. An American who comes into \$1 million dollars, in addition to whatever she already has, falls into at least the 93rd percentile of wealth; half that would put her in at least the 85th (data from *New York Times*, 2005). Such a person is surely characterized as "rich" for purposes of public discourse about, e.g., inequality. What standards *do* prevail in this context is not a question we need to answer

a sentence of the form, “C is rich” or “C is not rich” should be interpreted as saying to be so of the relevant persons C the same thing that other utterances of sentences of those forms, made in public-discursive contexts, say to be so of the relevant persons C, it follows that her utterances do not after all exemplify the thesis that what one says to be so of a person, in calling her “rich” or “not rich”, varies in accordance with local conversational standards for the application of that term.

Note that none of this is to deny that that well-off people *apply* “rich” in accord with H-standards; indeed, the further examples I’ve cited of such utterances (or of related utterances involving talk of “middle class”) reinforce Richard’s assumption to that effect. Indeed, the interests I’ve been discussing are served only if the well-off person both applies “rich” and “not rich” in accord with H-standards, and in so doing, locates the people of which she speaks in categories that are fixed independently of these standards, and, in fact, do not match up with them.

That treatment might seem objectionable on the ground that it would portray well-off people as strangely confused in their use of “rich”. The example of my use of “flammable” shows, which is anyway obvious, that one way an utterance can end up false is by the utterer’s allegiance to incorrect standards of application for relevant predicates. But in that case, it seems easy to trace my and Chester’s reliance on the incorrect standards to our misapprehension of a matter of fact, and one might worry about the current case: what factual mistake explains the well-off person’s reliance on incorrect standards of application for “rich”? That the right answer may be “no factual mistake” does not impugn the treatment here proposed. For the natural upshot of these reflections is that the well-off person’s reliance on H-standards is a form of *wishful thinking*. Roughly speaking, one’s belief that p is a product of wishful thinking if one’s believing that p is explained, not by one’s considered view of the reasons for and against believing that p, but by one’s desire that p (Bridges, ms; Elster, 1983, pp. 151ff). The hypothesis is that a well-off person is motivated to believe that she is not rich (with the content of that belief interpreted so as to render it apropos of the aforementioned debates and discourses) and so she does believe that. This in turn gives rise

for our purposes. Nor does it matter that any remotely plausible hypothesis about these standards will need to leave room for a very large degree of vagueness. I believe suspect the very assumption, essential to the kind of argument for contextualism now under scrutiny, that there is typically such as thing as the “standards” prevailing in a given discourse for application of predicates used in that discourse. But I won’t argue that line here.

to dispositions to classify people as rich and not rich (again, under the same interpretation) in ways consistent with locating herself in the latter category. That we can find no factual mistake at the root of her utterances is part of the point: wishful thinking may give rise to factual mistakes, but those mistakes are sourced not in other factual mistakes, but in psychological processes in which one's beliefs are not sensitive to evidential considerations at all.²⁶

Let me turn now to the second possible explanation of the well-off's distinctively stringent standards for application of "rich". As Richard observes, wealthy people more frequently "focus" on the lives of people toward the high end of the spectrum of means than do the rest of us. But that is not a matter merely of thinking and talking about such people more than the rest of us do. It's also a matter of rubbing shoulders with them on a day-to-day basis. And it is an interesting feature of wealth in the U.S. of the present time that unless you have a truly enormous amount of it, there's going to be someone just around the corner who's got a *lot* more. Frank remarks of those he calls "Lower Richistanis", i.e., Americans who have a household net worth between \$1 million and \$10 million, that "behind their newfound success lies a nagging sense of insecurity. Lower Richistanis may have more money than 95 percent of Americans, but they're becoming poorer relative to their fellow Richistanis. . . . When they go to cocktail parties or their kids' soccer games, Lower Richistanis run into crowds of people with vastly more wealth" (Frank, 2007a, p. 9). As a result, says Frank, "I've interviewed plenty of people worth between \$5 million and \$10 million and believe me, they don't feel wealthy" (Frank, 2007b). Along similar lines, a recent survey conducted by the New York Times (Traub, 2007) found that the economic class of New Yorkers most likely to say that "'seeing other people with money' makes them feel poor" were those earning over \$200,000 a year. The reporter tells us that "this is . . . a matter of proximity: To earn \$200,000 in New York's most rarefied precincts is to be made aware on a daily basis how modest is your place on the city's socioeconomic ladder." By contrast, a person living in a less "rarefied" precinct is much less likely to regularly encounter individuals who have not merely more money than she does, but vastly, astronomically, more money.

²⁶Two notes: 1) Leach, Snider and Iyer (2002) propose that something like the process of wishful thinking I am here positing is an instance of a familiar 'minimizing advantage' strategy for coping with dissonances produced by advantage. 2) The current hypothesis could also easily be made to square with a more nuanced view of motivated reasoning, in which, say, desires bias the selection of evidence from memory. See Kunda (1990, 1999).

Frank intends his observation that people worth between \$5 and \$10 million “don’t feel wealthy”—he could equally have said, “don’t feel rich”—to be striking and counterintuitive. But it wouldn’t be striking or counterintuitive if what “wealthy” in this context said to be so of a person was what Richard takes “rich” to say to be so of people when uttered in conversation among the wealthy. For we have it on Frank’s report that in such a conversation, the standards for application of “wealthy” and “rich” exclude his “Lower Richistanis”. We may presume that Frank himself is using “wealthy” to speak of that which it speaks in the public discourse in which he is participating—as I may non-question-beggingly put it in the context of this article, to speak of people as being (or feeling, etc.) wealthy, or more or less synonymously, rich. Leveraging Frank’s remark (and the remark to the same effect in the Times article cited above) into an explanation of the prevalence of H-standards in the conversations of those who are well-off but not super-rich, then, yields the following: such people apply “rich” in accord with standards that they themselves fail to meet because they believe that they aren’t rich, and they believe they aren’t rich because they notice how much less wealth they have than the super-rich. This thought cuts against the contextualist interpretation of their utterances of “rich”, for it explains the non-super-rich well-off’s utterances about who is “rich” and who is “not rich” in terms of beliefs that I here, and Frank in his writings, can characterize without misrepresentation as beliefs about who is rich and who is not rich.

Now, sociologists and social psychologists have long maintained that a person’s self-appraisals along any number of dimensions are heavily shaped, perhaps even largely determined, by comparative judgments to salient others, and that the class of others treated as salient tends to be drawn from the person’s immediate social context.²⁷ Adopting somewhat old-fashioned terminology, I will call this the *frame of reference principle*, with the salient class of others constituting the self-appraiser’s *frame of reference*. Research programs that have made much of this principle include reference group theory, social comparison theory and relative deprivation theory; see the social identity theory and the self-evaluation maintenance model for closely related ideas. Of particular relevance to the present discussion, sociologists have

²⁷Early work assumed that salience, for purposes of these judgments, was determined both by propinquity/interaction and perceived similarity (Hyman and Singer, 1968, p. 119). More recently, evidence has been offered that interaction is a more significant factor (Gartrell, 2002). This shift dovetails with the recent emphasis in sociology on the idea of a social network.

pointed to findings suggesting that a person's satisfaction with her economic situation tends to be determined more by comparative judgments to those in her economic class (or to others in her social network, who tend to be in her economic class) than by comparisons to others more generally or by judgments keyed to absolute (i.e., non-social-relational) features of her wealth or income (Crosby, 1976; Hyman, 1980; Runciman, 1966). And so, for example, the degree to which high-income people are in general more satisfied with their allotment than middle- or low-income people is much smaller than one might otherwise have predicted. Analogous findings have been produced for an array of related items such as job satisfaction (Alain, 1985; Form and Geschwender, 1962; Pfeffer, 1991).

The explanation of the well-off's adherence to H-standards that I leveraged out of Frank's and the Times reporter's explanations of why the well-off do not feel wealthy (or do feel poor) in effect treats the adherence to H-standards as an instance of the frame of reference principle. That explanation seemed to support an interpretation of the content of the well-off's remarks that is in opposition to Richard's. But this further result might seem like an artifact of the particular way in which, picking up on an admittedly subtle implication of Frank's and the reporter's own characterizations, I formulated the explanation. A contextualist might construe the matter differently: different frames of reference, she might say, have the effect of shifting the content expressed by the terms of appraisal. Certainly there's nothing logically inconsistent about that proposal. But it's worth noting that sociologists and social psychologists do not themselves tend to consider contextualist glosses on the frame-of-reference phenomena they document. They do not tend to entertain the possibility that when the soldier evaluates himself as not "cowardly" after noting other soldiers who have also run from battle, or an undergraduate job applicant, after spending time in a waiting room with an incompetent-seeming competitor, evaluates himself highly on a self-esteem inventory asking such things as whether he is "proud", or a woman evaluates herself as having "respect and prestige" in a context in which the salient comparison class is other female coworkers, he or she is using that term to express a *different content* than the soldier or undergraduate job applicant or female employee who makes an opposing application of the term in a context in which a different comparison class is salient.²⁸ Rather,

²⁸These examples are respectively from Smith (2000), Morse and Gergen (1970), and Crosby (1982).

they take the opposing applications to express *conflicting beliefs* (modulo the person being appraised) regarding the very same categories of appraisal.

Nor is this omission a testament to a failure of imagination on the part of these theorists. There are good reasons why this interpretation of their data should not have occurred to them. One reason is that the effects of the differences in self-appraisal induced by the use of different frames of reference are not localized to the application of a single term of appraisal. Typically a given such difference of appraisal (which may be either an inter-personal difference or an intra-personal difference across time) is accompanied by a host of attitudinal, affective and behavioral differences. Indeed, much of the interest of particular frame-of-reference phenomena for social psychologists and sociologists has been in the implications of these phenomena for self-esteem, happiness, resentment, etc. In the arena of appraisals of economic well-being, researchers have long studied the impact of frame-of-reference effects on such things as perceptions of injustice and willingness to engage in collective action.²⁹ Since experimental data indicate that there is likely a range of attitudinal and affective differences between, e.g., the student who says he's "proud" and the one who, confronted with a different frame of reference, says he isn't, the researchers naturally take the differing applications of that term to bespeak meaningful cognitive differences—such as we would ascribe if we interpreted the utterances as making opposing claims about the subjects' relationship to a univocal evaluative category.

A second reason is that frame of reference effects are very widespread, and in particular occur in a lot of cases where a contextualist interpretation of the data ought to seem bizarre, or at least extremely forced, to almost anyone. I chose, e.g., the "proud" example precisely because it is such a case. Of course, the fact that some frame of reference effects don't readily admit of a contextualist interpretation doesn't mean that none do; the category is obviously very broad (and admittedly loosely defined). The point is that insofar as we view the wealthy person's disposition to apply "rich" in accord with stringent standards as an instance of the frame of reference principle, then we need to be given some distinctive reason for accepting a contextualist interpretation of this phenomenon when like phenomena go in for an alternative treatment that appears well-suited in this case as well.

Recently, and congruent with the rise to dominance of cognitive psychology, there have been a number of attempts in the psychological literature

²⁹See Walker and Smith (2002a) for a survey of this disputed terrain.

to understand frame of reference effects in terms of more general cognitive mechanisms. For example, Wedell and Parducci (2000) argue that (what I've been calling) the frame of reference principle can be explained in terms of the "range-frequency theory", a "theory of judgment" whose most obvious application is to a certain well-known psychophysical phenomenon. The basic idea is that a subject will locate items in a graded category structure in a manner that strikes a balance between distributing the contextually salient items evenly among the categories and locating the boundaries of the categories at regular intervals within the range defined by the contextually salient items with the least and greatest degree of the gradable property. The aforementioned psychophysical phenomenon to which it applies is exemplified by the experimentally well-established fact that a given line will be judged to have a much greater length (with, say, "inches" being the requested unit of measurement) when placed in a context of shorter lines than when placed in a context of longer lines. Interestingly, the question of whether such experimental results ought to be given a contextualist interpretation was discussed in the psychophysical literature many years before the contemporary literature on semantic contextualism in philosophy and linguistics. For example, Manis (1967) argues against the view, defended in Campbell, Lewis and Hunt (1958) and elsewhere, that "an extreme context does not affect the subject's subjective experience, but instead influences the 'language' which he uses to describe this experience, and thus represents a semantic, rather than a perceptual, effect" (Manis, 1967, p. 327). The consensus has tended to be that the contextualist interpretation is inadequate to the range of psychophysical experimental data. It is worth recording here, as a final comment on the second explanation I proposed, the grounds given by Wedell and Parducci (2000) for rejecting a contextual interpretation of the still larger set of data to which they seek to apply their theory. For their grounds correspond closely to the two reasons I gave above:

One issue that arises when discussing the nature of context effects is whether the changes in judgment so regularly observed with changes in context correspond to 'real' changes in the psychological impression of the stimulus or whether they are simply an artifact of how responses are generated and communicated. . . . [W]e believe there is good evidence that range-frequency effects reflect changes not just in the overt responses but also in the subjective impressions. For example, the basic contrast effects

described by range-frequency theory occur across a wide variety of responses, from category ratings to physiological measures of anxiety to the speed with which rats run toward a reward. It also is clear that range-frequency theory effects occur even when none of the contextual stimuli are overtly rated . . . Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the psychological reality of the contrast effects described by range-frequency theory is found when range-frequency values serve as the basis of other operations, such as determining equity, preference, or similarity (Wedell and Parducci, 2000, p. 232).

This discussion of possible interests and areas of focus shaping the application of “rich” by the rich—interests and areas both alternative to the taxonomic interests taken for granted by Richard and tending toward an opposing, anti-contextualist interpretation of the contents expressed by those applications—has perhaps been a bit lengthy, but it certainly hasn’t been decisive. I have tried to show that there is good reason to suppose that some such motivational, affective and cognitive mechanisms as those I’ve been describing play a significant role in directing the way wealthy people think and talk about wealth. And I’ve argued that understanding the role of these mechanisms in shaping those thoughts and utterances will require thinking of those utterances as concerned to situate the people under discussion in relation to categories in view in the larger public discourse about wealth. But even if all that is true, it doesn’t follow of any given utterance of the form “*x* is rich” by any given wealthy person that the utterance will reflect these dynamics. How do we know if, for example, any of this is at stake for Naomi in her remark about Mary?

How, indeed? We can’t answer such questions because we don’t know very much about Naomi. And of course, given the limited narrative uses to which Richard puts her, there’s nothing much to know. This illustrates how contextualists have failed to discharge an obligation incurred by one of their commitments. The commitment is that the content of an utterance is constitutively connected to its point. The obligation this incurs is to think non-superficially—as people in psychology and related disciplines, and of course in literature, have long endeavored to do—about what the point of an utterance might be, about the interests and focus that might shape its significance. My working hypothesis is that the more we undertake to do this, the more we will be inclined toward an interpretive starting point in

which utterances are conceived, not as given over to registering distinctions of only the most parochial significance, but as speaking to, and hence of, a wider world.

§5. Properties, and what it is to have them

François Recanati writes of the word “red”:

[C]onsider the adjective ‘red’. Vagueness notwithstanding, it expresses a definite property: the property of being red or having the colour red. But in most cases the following question will arise: what is it for the thing talked about to count as having that colour? *Unless that question is answered, the utterance ascribing redness to the thing talked about (John’s car, say) will not be truth-evaluable.* It is not enough to know the colour that is in question (red) and the thing to which that colour is ascribed (John’s car). To fix the utterance’s truth-conditions, we need to know something more—something which the meanings of the words do not and cannot give us: we need to know *what it is for that thing (or for that sort of thing) to count as being that colour.* What is it for a car, a bird, a house, a pen or a pair of shoes to count as red? To answer such questions, we need to appeal to background assumptions and world knowledge. Linguistic competence does not suffice: pragmatic fine-tuning is called for. (Recanati, 2005, p. 183, emphasis in original)

What it is to be red, Recanati claims here, varies depending upon the kind of object in question. For example (according to a linguistics study he quotes approvingly in a footnote), being red for a bird requires being naturally red, whereas tables can just be painted red; being red for a car, but not for a house, requires having a red roof; etc. (Recanati, 2005, pp. 183–184fn.). Recanati takes this point to show that determining the truth-conditions for a sentence that uses the adjective “red” to characterize an object of a given kind will require knowing what it is for an object of that kind to be red. The assumption is evidently that because what it is to be red for a bird is different from what it is to be red for a car, what one says to be so of a bird, in applying the predicate “is red” to it, is different from what one says to be so of a car in applying “is red” to it.

This conclusion does not straightforwardly yield the existence of contrasting cases. Consider, for example, the following two sentences:

- (1) Pia's bird is red.
- (2) Pia's car is red.

Even if we accept that we say something different to be so of a bird than a car when we speak of it as "red", this does not show that different utterances of (1), say, will vary amongst themselves in truth-conditions in a manner traceable to the presence of "red". Utterances of (1) speak of birds, not of cars, so the alleged difference in question is simply irrelevant. Recanati would presumably claim that:

- (3) That is red.

will say different things to be so of the demonstrated object depending upon whether it is a bird or car. But we have a contrasting-argument for the presence of predicate context-sensitivity only if we have cases in which the difference in truth-value cannot be explained otherwise than by positing such context-sensitivity. Such cases must be constructed so as to neutralize the context-sensitivity introduced by the demonstrative. And describing two utterances of (3) in which different objects are demonstrated (one a bird and one a car) obviously does not meet this criterion.

How, then, do Recanati's reflections speak against invariantism? His explicit target is the approach to compositionality exemplified by the Davidsonian model for theories of meaning. But we needn't get into issues of compositionality per se to see the potential force of Recanati's objection against invariantism. If invariantism is true with respect to a given predicate P, then every use of P to say something to be so of an object must (bracketing ambiguity) say the same thing to be so of the objects at issue. It would seem, then, that we ought to be able to specify what it is, quite generally, that P can be used to say to be so of objects. One format for doing so (ignoring the oversimplified notion of satisfaction here employed) might be this:

- (4) An object x satisfies "is red" iff x is red.

We can think of (4) as intended to convey what an utterance containing "is red" says to be so of objects in virtue of deploying that expression, on

analogy to the role envisioned for T-sentences in §2. Recanati's reflections can be construed as denying that (4), or any other such statement, can serve this purpose. (4) cannot simultaneously express what is said to be so of a bird by an utterance of "Pia's bird is red" and what is said to be so of a car by an utterance of "Pia's car is red" because, according to Recanati, these utterances say different things to be so of the objects of which they speak.

Be that as it may, Recanati's line of thought is vitiated by the manifest invalidity of its first step. We have no reason to accept the inference from the premise that what it is to be red is different for a bird than for a car to the conclusion that (1) and (2) say different things to be so of the objects they respectively concern. The inference evidently rests on a principle along the following lines: if what it is for an F to be G is for it to be H, then an utterance which speaks of a particular F as G says of that F that it is H. And that principle is false. One can accept the Putnam/Kripke view that what it is for an object to be made out of gold is to be composed of the substance with atomic number 79 without being committed to the claim that an English speaker who utters, "This ring is gold," is thereby saying of the demonstrated object that it is composed of the substance with atomic number 79. One can accept a neo-Lockean view about what it is for a sentence of the form " D_1 at t_1 is the same person as D_2 at t_2 " without being committed to the claim that an English speaker who utters, "This woman is the same as the one who tailed us through Paris last week," is thereby saying of the woman in question that she bears such-and-such a memory link to the tail in Paris. To take a less philosophical example, one can be absolutely convinced that what it is for a catcher be a good ball player is for him to call an intelligent game, make extremely few errors, and hit at least decently, without being committed to the claim that an English speaker who utters, "Jerry McNertney was a good ball player," thereby says of Jerry McNertney that he called an intelligent game, made extremely few errors, and hit at least decently. And so on.

Recanati attempts to motivate his inference with the claim that one needs to know what it is for an F to be G in order to know the truth-conditions of an utterance explicitly ascribing G-ness to an F. But the examples just given show this claim to be no more plausible than the inference it is meant to facilitate. I can know the truth conditions of my assertion of "The liquid in my cup is water" without knowing what it is for that liquid to be water. It is in fact a remarkably implausible claim that one must have a piece of knowledge aptly describable as knowledge of *what it is* for an F to be G in order to grasp the content of claims ascribing G-ness to F's. Such knowledge

is often the explicit target of investigations in philosophy, the special sciences, and everyday discourse about familiar phenomena. Do we believe that we don't know what we're saying, when we speak of things as G, in advance of satisfactorily concluding such investigations?³⁰

Recanati makes a play at offering some support for the claim by drawing an analogy to knowledge of the referents of referring expressions: "If I say '*Oscar cuts the sun*' is true iff Oscar cuts the sun', without knowing what it is to 'cut the sun', then the T-sentence I utter no more counts as displaying knowledge of truth-conditions than if I utter it without knowing who Oscar is" (Recanati, 2005, p. 185). But the proper parallel to knowing what it is to cut the sun is not knowing *who Oscar is*, but knowing *what it is for a person to be Oscar*. If that phrase speaks of anything intelligible at all, then it speaks of a piece of constitutive knowledge about the identity and individuation of a person. And again, it is simply false that one must know the answer to this hotly debated philosophical question in order to understand utterances about Oscar.

In a similar vein, Recanati suggests that rejecting his claim would constitute: "an unacceptable weakening of the notion of truth-condition. . . . If we know the truth-conditions of a sentence, we know *which state of affairs must hold for the sentence to be true*" (Recanati, 2005, p. 185). So long as no metaphysically loaded conception of a state of affairs is in play here, this remark is unobjectionable. But again, knowing which state of affairs must hold for a sentence to be true does not entail knowing what it is for that state of affairs to obtain, and so the unobjectionable suggestion cannot help Recanati's case.

None of this is to deny that we have good reason to doubt that a person can be legitimately credited with mastery of the word "red" if we discover her to be incapable of determining the truth value of at least a fair range of utterances of the form, "*x is red*". In the usual case, possession of the concept of redness is at least partly possession of a recognitional capacity.³¹ Someone unable to recognize any ordinary red objects as red would lack that capacity, and ordinary objects include, of course, cars and birds. But invariantism has no problem accommodating this point. Matters might seem otherwise if we assume an axiom like (4) is intended to identify a piece of

³⁰I offer some discussion the logic of claims about what it is to be G (which I label "constitutive claims") in Bridges (2006).

³¹The point of the hedging is to leave open the possibility that a blind person might possess the concept of redness.

knowledge that guides an English speaker's understanding of utterances of sentences like (1) and (2). That assumption is a version of psychologism, and a psychologistic interpretation of truth-conditional theories of meaning is no part of invariantism, or truth-conditional semantics, as such.³² So far as truth-conditional semantics is concerned, we can suppose that an English speaker's grasp of (4) and her grasp of the contents of utterances of sentences like (1) and (2) are interdependent.

I take it that the real source of the line of thought just traced lies in Recanati's attraction to a certain view about "what it is for someone to learn a predicate P". This view he takes to be "in the spirit of Wittgenstein" (Recanati, 2005, p. 190). There are three key concepts. First is the idea of a "source-situation", where source-situations are "situations such that members of the community agree that [a predicate] P applies in or to those situations" (2005, pp. 190–191). The "learning phase", says Recanati, "consists in noting a sufficient number of" source-situations (2005, p. 190). The second concept is that of a "target-situation", that is, a situation in which the question arises for the speaker whether P applies. "Future applications of P will be underpinned, in Tom's [i.e., the learner's] usage," says Recanati, "by the judgement that the situation of application (or target-situation) is similar to the source-situations" (2005, p. 190). But similar how? This question prompts the final concept: that of "the conditions of application of P" with respect to a given target situation. These are "*a set of features S₃ [the target-situation] must possess to be similar to the source-situations*" (2005, p. 191). Crucially, which features are relevant will vary from case to case: "it is going to depend, among other things, on the target-situation" (2005, p. 191). So for example, different features will need to be present in the case of a bird as opposed to a car if the target-situation is to count as sufficiently similar to source-situations to license application of the predicate "is red". And as changes the conditions of application for "is red", so changes the content of an utterance employing that predicate. In changing "the set of similarity features upon which sense depends", we "change the truth-conditions of a given utterance" (2005, pp. 191–192).

On this theory, the learner learns that he is to apply P to a given target situation only if the target situation possesses the features constituting the conditions of application for P in that situation. But in what will his knowledge that these features are present consist? As the block quote at the

³²For a further discussion of this point see Bridges (forthcoming).

beginning of this section makes clear, Recanati takes the question of what it is for a given predicate or adjective to apply to a given object as tantamount to the question of what it is for the object to have the property expressed by that predicate. Thus in offering a theory of the basis upon which we apply predicates to objects, he is equally offering a theory of the basis upon which we credit objects with properties. Moreover, the theory is meant to apply generally, not just to some special class of predicates and properties. Thus it will apply in particular to the features whose presence constitutes the conditions of application for P on a given occasion. It follows that every one of these features P' will need to be associated by the learner with its own structure of source situations, target situations and contextually-sensitive conditions of application. And then each of the features P'' going into the conditions of application for P' on given occasions will need to be associated by the learner with its own source situations, target situations and conditions of application. And so on.

This regress is genuinely vicious. At bottom, the problem is a simple one. It cannot be true of all properties P that we recognize an object x to have P, if we do, only on the basis of our recognizing that x has some distinct property P'. If recognition that given objects have given properties is to be possible at all, we must sometimes be able to simply recognize that an object has a certain property—not on the basis of a further such recognition, but, for example, by seeing that it is so.

On a familiar picture of what is involved in learning a first language, the language learner is confronted with situations in which people apply a given word, say “red”, to things. Her job is to abstract from these situations the property that “red” expresses. Once she associates the right property with “red”, she has acquired its meaning, and can then go on to apply it appropriately herself. A contextualist might attempt to hold onto the key element of this picture, while resisting its apparent invariantist implications, by positing an additional process of “modulation” that takes the learner (now speaker) from the meaning of “red” to more specific, contextually determined senses on given occasions of application. Recanati regards the theory I've been critiquing as moving still farther from the original picture by “*suppressing the intermediary step* (linguistic meaning)” (Recanati, 2005, p. 189). “This amounts”, he says, “to merging the two construction processes: the abstraction of meaning from use, and the modulation of meaning in use . . . [T]here is a single process of abstraction-modulation which takes as input previous uses of the expression and yields as output the contextual sense assumed by

the expression on the current use" (2005, p. 190).

In commenting on a passage that might be taken to articulate a version of the first of the three alternatives mentioned in the previous paragraph, Wittgenstein writes: "Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one." (Wittgenstein, 1958, §32). It should be clear that the worry Wittgenstein is raising here applies equally to the other two views, for it can be brought to bear on the idea, common to all, of a process of "abstraction". We must ask: what could it mean for the learner, in advance of possessing the conceptual capacities that come with mastery of ordinary language, to (as Recanati, 2005, p. 190, puts it) "observe" situations from which he might then "abstract" properties? Does he conceptualize these "observations"? If yes, then where did these conceptual capacities come from? And if he already has concepts apt for articulating his observations, why does he need to engage in abstraction? If on the other hand the observations are not conceptualized, then how are they present to him in such a way that he is able to abstract anything from them? If abstraction is not to be understood as a concept-involving activity, then how exactly does it put the learner in a position to "judge that P applies only if he finds that S^2 sufficiently resembles S^1 " (Recanati, 2005, p. 190)? The multiplication of "features" bearing on correct application of P posited in Recanati's theory does not somehow sidestep these questions; it merely multiplies the items with respect to which they can be pressed

Recanati's theory may be motivated by an imperfect appreciation of the difficulties for the idea of abstraction suggested by Wittgenstein's reflections on understanding. When Recanati speaks of his theory as "in the spirit of Wittgenstein", he obviously has in mind Wittgenstein's discussion of "family resemblance" terms like "game". And certainly it is reasonable to read that discussion as serving to undermine the idea that examples of the application of, say, "game", enable the learning of the meaning of "game" by presenting opportunities for the learner to abstract the property of being a game. In that discussion, Wittgenstein suggests that if we try to explain the use of "game" by identifying features in common to all the activities we call "games", we will find not universally shared features but "family resemblances"—that is to say, "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (Wittgenstein, 1958, §66). The point of this observation is not that

an individual example of a game, which will have only some of the family resemblances shared by games, somehow fails to fully exhibit the property of being a game, or, à la the contextualist, exhibits the property of being a game only on some specialized, contextually-determined understanding of it. The point of emphasizing the family-resemblance character of games is rather to give the lie to the thought that there is something present in a given example of a game which, were the learner only to seize upon it, would show him how to apply “game” in future cases, such that he would be guaranteed to apply that term correctly down the road. In demonstrating the unsystematic diversity of the activities we might cite as examples of what we call “games”, Wittgenstein wants us to see, first, that a learner’s acquiring an understanding of “game” rests upon her being disposed to project the examples we offer to new cases in more or less the same ways that we do, and second, that her having these dispositions is a precondition of successful explanation of the use of “game”; it is not something the explanations can themselves provide. The idea that the learner abstracts a property from the examples with which she is presented and then proceeds to apply the term on that basis is intended precisely to explain the learner’s projecting these examples to new cases in the right way. It thus runs into conflict with Wittgenstein’s point.

In suggesting that his theory “comes close to what I think Austin and Wittgenstein had in mind” (Recanati, 2005, p. 188), Recanati indicates an appreciation that the observation about family resemblances cuts against the idea that we learn how to apply “game” by abstracting the property of being a game from the examples others provide of things called “games”. But what Recanati suggests instead is that we learn how to apply “game” by abstracting from these examples the “features” that constitute the shifting whirl of family resemblances displayed across games. And from Wittgenstein’s perspective, that is no advance. Wittgenstein draws attention to family resemblances not to offer a better candidate for what a learner might abstract from examples, but to challenge the picture of understanding that might make talk of abstraction seem illuminating. Seen from this angle, Recanati’s contextualism looks like an attempt to incorporate the family-resemblance observation into a framework that takes for granted the assumption that is Wittgenstein’s primary target.³³

³³For a further criticism of attempts to read contextualism back into Wittgenstein’s family-resemblance discussion, see Bridges (forthcoming).

§6. Conclusion: towards a broad contextualism?

I have considered three lines of thought that might be taken to legitimate reliance on the alleged data that motivates contextualism, the alleged data being cases in which utterances of the same sentence (or utterances of different sentences containing the same predicate) differ in truth value, and do so in ways that seem to admit of explanation in terms of differences in what the predicates are used to say to be so of objects. The three lines of thought were: 1) that respecting our initial intuitions about these differences is necessitated by a proper respect for “ordinary usage”; 2) that the existence of these differences is supported by the premise that content is constitutively dependent upon point coupled with plausible hypotheses about the points of the utterances; and 3) that these differences correspond to differences in what it is for a given kind of object to have a given property, such differences registering at the level of content in virtue of a putatively Wittgensteinian picture of the nature of understanding. I’ve argued that all three lines of thought are in error.

I’ll close with two tentative general observations.

The first is that contextualism, in the forms we’ve considered in this paper, renders it easier for us to be right in the things we say. It renders it easier for us to be right in the things we say because it entails that, in effect, we *make* ourselves right. In having the interests and focus we do, or the intuitions about application we do, we shape the contents of our utterances in such a way as to go some distance toward ensuring their correctness. That might seem a pleasing prospect. The problem is that the easier it is for us to be right, the less there is for us to be wrong about. And that means the less there is for us to find in the world to talk and think about and possibly come to understand. Only if our utterances are aptly interpretable as attempting to place the objects and people we discuss in categories constituted independently of the standards and dispositions of use governing our immediate discursive context will those utterances be beholden to a subject matter whose objectivity promises no end of challenges for our understanding.

The second observation is this. At the outset, I stipulated that *semantic* properties of an expression are properties possessed by the expression independently of the circumstances of its utterance, and that an utterance’s content fails to be *context-dependent* only if semantic properties of the uttered sentence suffice to determine that content. But if talk of “circumstances of utterance” is understood broadly enough, there will be no such thing as

a semantic property. No expression in a natural language has a meaning independently of the circumstance that speakers of that language use, and have used, that expression in the ways that they do. So conceived, contextualism is undeniably and universally true. This may seem an empty verbal maneuver. But in fact, there may be some point in thinking in terms of a broader contextualism. Thinking in these terms, we can acknowledge that the content of an utterance is constitutively linked, just as the contextualist claims, to use and to point. But at the same time, we can insist that the use and point that bear upon the content of an utterance are potentially rich and open-ended enough that there is no guarantee we will have made provision for them unless we conceive the context of the utterance as encompassing very wide swaths of discourse indeed—perhaps even the whole of the language in use. As Wittgenstein writes, “What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what one man is doing now, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action” (Wittgenstein, 1967, §567).

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