

WILLIAMS ON KAPLAN ON THE CONTINGENT ANALYTIC

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In ‘Do I Have To Be Here Now?’,¹ Professor C. J. F. Williams argues against Kaplan’s claim, that the sentence ‘I am here now’ expresses a contingent but analytically true proposition in the mouth of any contingently existing speaker, on the grounds that ‘the sentence is not a proposition’.²

Following Geach, Williams professes to be unhappy with the suggestion that propositions are abstract entities expressed by sentences; instead, he prefers to say that some sentences are propositions.³ However, there are surely further options. In particular, it seems that one could choose to construe talk of propositions as talk about, e.g., the conditions under which utterances of sentences are equivalent – in extension, or intension, or character, or whatever – without supposing that this talk commits one to any extra entities. Indeed, given objects and properties – both of which Williams admits into his ontology – one only needs some of the resources of set theory in order to generate the semantic theory to which Kaplan commits himself. Since Williams himself provides no clue about how he would construct a semantic theory to encode the information which Kaplan’s theory encodes, this seems to be a point in favour of Kaplan’s view.

Suppose we set these kinds of considerations aside. The point of this note is to suggest that, even then, Williams’ position faces a severe internal difficulty, which arises from his assumption that a sentence is a proposition only if it contains referential devices which operate independently of context of utterance. This view is clearly evident in the following passage:

Above all else . . . a proposition is . . . the sort of thing that can be true or false. If I come across a sentence containing indexicals, as one might do in a letter one chanced to pick up, I may be completely unable to judge whether it is true or false. [The sentence] ‘I was here yesterday’ cannot be assessed as either true or false without further information. The information required will be concerned, not with what it says, but with who said it and

when. . . . Indexicals induce truth-value instability. This was Frege's reason for denying that such sentences express complete thoughts. . . . We may compare the case of the proposition "Cicero names the man who denounced Catiline" ['Paris is in France', 'C.J.F.W. is in Oxford on September 23, 1991'].⁴

As this passage makes clear, Williams' test for whether or not a sentence is a proposition is whether, were one to come across a token of the sentence in a letter in conditions in which one is ignorant about the circumstances in which the letter was written – i.e. when, where, and by whom – one would be able to judge whether the sentence is true or false without acquiring the further information about the circumstances in which the letter was written.

One obvious objection to the test, as stated, is that one might not be able to judge whether a sentence is true or false because one lacks concepts which are required in order to understand the sentence. However, a little idealisation will allow us to avoid this problem – for we can suppose that the person in question possesses all relevant non-indexical information about the world. Even so, there is still a problem. For consider the following sentences, each of which would be taken by Williams to be a proposition: 'Williams writes on identity', 'Kevin is a Martian', 'The man in the corner is ill', 'Everyone tried hard', ' $2+3=1$ '. In every case, we need more information about the circumstances in which the sentence is tokened before we can evaluate it for truth or falsity, for we need to be able to answer questions like the following: which person called 'Williams'?; which person called 'Kevin'; what are the Martians (a football team, perhaps)?; which corner?; which group of people?; relative to which base for arithmetic?; etc. On Williams view – as far as I can see – there will be no propositions at all, i.e. no sentences which pass Williams' test: Does 'Cicero' name someone who denounced Catiline?; no, the person who denounced my uncle was in fact called 'Fred Smith'. Is Paris in France?; no, it's in Texas. Was C.J.F.W. in Oxford on September 23, 1991?; no, in fact my neighbour wasn't even in Alabama; etc. Even sentences like 'The sky is blue' fail Williams' test: for, in context, an utterance of this sentence could be a remark about a painting, or an observation about the typical colour of a cloudless sky, or a claim about the colour of the sky at the time and place of writing, etc.

The role of context in the determination of what a sentence says has many dimensions. Features of context help to determine: the reference of directly referential singular terms; the denotation of definite descriptions; the domain of quantification; the disambiguation of predicates; etc. Often this determination proceeds by way of salience; and it can also depend upon updating of conversational score.⁵ The indexicals which are the subject matter of Williams' paper are special because it seems that the only contribution which they require from context is time of utterance, place of utterance, and identity of speaker.⁶ But this does not mean that context plays a relevantly different kind of role for them than it plays in the case of proper names, demonstratives, definite descriptions, quantifiers and predicates. In particular, any reason for saying that sentences which contain these indexicals are not propositions will be at least as good a reason for saying that sentences which contain proper names, demonstratives, definite descriptions, quantifiers, or predicates are not propositions, since there is more which contexts may need to do in these cases, and in a less clearly or straightforwardly rule-governed way.

The difficulty for Williams' view can be made most vivid by means of a well-known thought experiment. Suppose that the universe is symmetrical, and that there is a Twin Earth which is qualitatively identical with Earth. Pick any string of words which, in Earth English, refers to a contingent fact about the Earth, and hence which, in Twin Earth English, refers to a contingent fact about Twin Earth. Clearly, in this case, if one does not know where the string of words is tokened, then, in the sense relevant to Williams' discussion, one does not know what is being said. Consequently, there are conceivable circumstances in which, for almost any sentence at all which expresses contingent information, one is not able to work out what an utterance of that sentence says without some essentially indexical information – namely, where the utterance was made.

I conclude that, whether or not Kaplan is correct to claim that the sentence 'I am here now' expresses a contingent but analytically true proposition in the mouth of any contingently existing speaker, Williams' suggestion that Kaplan is wrong because this sentence 'is not a proposition' is unhelpful.

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¹Ratio n.s. **6.2**, December 1993, pp.165-180. Subsequently cited page numbers refer to this text.

²p.165

³p.166

⁴pp.167-168

⁵See David Lewis' "Score-keeping In A Language Game" Journal Of Philosophical Logic **8**, 1979, pp.339-359 -- reprinted in Philosophical Papers Volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp.233-249 -- and "Index, Context, And Content" in S. Kanger (ed.) Philosophy And Grammar, (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1981), pp.79-100, for a clear discussion of these matters.

⁶Perhaps -- contra both Kaplan and Williams -- the content of the indexicals "here" and "now" requires more contextual information than merely time and place of utterance. In particular, a suitable frame of reference may need to be fixed upon: is the place in question a point fixed relative to the interior of a moving train carriage? a point fixed relative to the surface of the earth? a point fixed relative to the centre of our galaxy? etc. See my "Salmon On The Contingent A Priori And Necessary A Posteriori" Philosophical Studies **73**, 1994, p30n30, for more on this point.