

Replies to Raffman, Stanley, and Wright

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I am extremely grateful to all of my commentators for taking the time to engage with my book, and for their thoughtful and incisive remarks. Because of space constraints, I will have to be selective in my replies.

Reply to Raffman

Diana Raffman pushes back on some of the judgments that I use to argue for a relativist treatment of “tasty” and “might,” against more standard contextualist views. She denies that it would be appropriate to respond to an assertion of

(1) Licorice is tasty

by saying “No, it isn’t” or “You’re mistaken, it’s not.” I’ll concede that there are several ways in which these responses might be “inappropriate,” in context. They might be too harsh or confrontational, or they might pointlessly start arguments. But a defender of (solipsistic) contextualism needs to go beyond saying that these responses are inappropriate. She needs to argue that they are *false*, and that the corresponding affirmations—“Yes, it is” and “You’re right, it is”—are true. That does not strike me as plausible. If you find licorice disgusting, you cannot reply to an assertion of (1) by saying “Yes,” or “That’s true,” or “I didn’t realize that.” On the other hand, these replies are perfectly appropriate as responses to

(2) Licorice is tasty to me

How can the solipsistic contextualist explain this difference? Raffman’s observation that even an explicitly subjective assertion like (2) can start an argument (grounded in a disagreement about what tastes the parties *should* have) can help the contextualist explain how (1) can be the focus of disagreements. But it does nothing to explain the differences between (1) and (2).

Raffman suggests that when Sally says

(3) Joe might be in China

and George replies,

(4) No, he can't be in China,

George's "No" targets the prejacent in (3). On this reading, George is not rejecting the proposition Sally asserted; he is only denying that George *is* in China. The "can't," Raffman suggests, is just an evidential marker, signaling that the claim is based on inference.

But suppose that instead of (3), Sally says

(5) Joe is probably in China. He spent most of last month there, and I haven't seen him around here for days.

George replies:

(6) No, he is just as likely to be in Japan. He just started a new collaboration there.

Here "No" cannot be read as targeting the prejacent in (5). George is not denying that Joe *is* in China. He must, then, be denying the whole modal claim, that Joe is probably in China. The relativist account explains this in the same way as it explains the data about (3) and (4), but Raffman's explanatory strategy cannot be extended to this case.

Raffman wonders whether ordinary speakers really exhibit the retraction behavior predicted by the relativist account. Does "Forget what I said before" count as a retraction of the earlier claim, or just an injunction to disregard it, since a claim about what was an open possibility given an earlier state of information is not terribly useful? As Raffman observes, this is not always easy to discern.

It is hard to get at retraction empirically. Asking "Were you wrong to assert that earlier?" is not a good test, since retraction need not involve admission of fault (MacFarlane 2014, 109). Asking "Was what you asserted false?" is also not a good test, because one need not think one's assertion false in order to have reason to retract it, and because a nonindexical contextualist might answer that question affirmatively while taking the proposition asserted to be true relative to the context in which it was asserted. I prefer "Do you stand by your earlier assertion?," but Raffman's remarks make me worry that a negative answer needn't mean retraction.

Reply to Stanley

Jason Stanley concedes that a case might be made for inclusion of parameters like tastes or standards in a semantic theory, but urges that this would have no immediate ramifications for what we say about propositional truth, and would not show that we believe or assert assessment-sensitive propositions. For example, even if we concluded that (1) has a taste-neutral compositional semantic value, it would still be an open question whether speakers use (1) to assert the proposition that licorice is tasty to the speaker.

I agree wholeheartedly. In the book, I argue that the considerations that tell for and against inclusion of a parameter in the index do not settle whether propositional truth is relative to that parameter (MacFarlane 2014, 83–84). So, although I am partial to views on which propositional truth varies with tastes and information state, I agree with Stanley, Lewis and Dummett that such views cannot be motivated solely on compositional semantic grounds. That is why, after laying out a semantic theory for epistemic modals that takes the index to include a world, time, and information state, I note explicitly that this semantic theory is compatible with a variety of views about propositions, including views on which propositional truth is not relative to times or information states (263–4).

The role of the compositional semantics is not to provide arguments for the assessment sensitivity of the target expressions, but to give a systematic *description* of the truth conditions of sentences containing these expressions. To argue that these sentences (and the propositions they are used to assert) are assessment-sensitive, we ask under what conditions speakers take assertions of them to be warranted, under what conditions they take retractions of prior assertions of them to be required, and how they take these assertions to agree and disagree with others. We can then consider whether taking the propositions to be assessment-sensitive gives the best explanation of these facts about usage. Having settled this, we can turn to the problem of giving a compositional semantics that spits out appropriate assignments of truth at a context of use and context of assessment for sentences that embed the target expressions in different ways. The argument for assessment sensitivity is prior to the compositional semantics and does not depend on it.

I agree with Stanley that there are many different kinds of disagreement, and not all of them are best understood as disagreement about the truth of a proposition. Chapter 6 is devoted to distinguishing several varieties of disagreement and asking how we can tell them apart. But in the book I express skepticism that what Stanley calls Disagreement 1—the expression of incompatible Kaplanian characters—is a kind of disagreement at all (MacFarlane 2014, 10–11). As Stanley observes himself, “Disagreement 1 wildly over-generates predictions of disagreement.” Stanley seems confident that a restricted version can be formulated that avoids over-generation, but he does not give any substantive account of the needed restriction, and does not explain why character-centered disagreement should be possible in some cases but not others.

One might look to this sort of example for inspiration:

(7) *First student (at a demonstration)*: We support the administration!

Second student: No/that's wrong/that's false, we don't!

The first student may intend to use “we” to refer to herself and her group (which does not include the second student). And the second student may know that. But using “we” can be a political act, and the second student is contesting the first’s right to use “we” in this restricted way. As I understand him, Stanley is suggesting that something similar may be going on in disagreements about what is tasty (cf. Plunkett and Sundell 2013 and Raffman, above).

I think this line of thought is worth pursuing, at far greater length than is possible here. But I am not persuaded it is right, for two reasons. First, in disputes about what is tasty, we do not seem to be contesting each other’s right to use “tasty” in relation to our own tastes. On the contrary, I would think you were *misusing* the word “tasty” if you applied it to food you found unappealing, even if, as a result, you agreed with my judgments. Perhaps, as Raffman suggests, the force of my denial (“No”) is that, even though you are using “tasty” appropriately in relation to your tastes, you ought to have different tastes. But why, then, don’t we see similar effects with “here” in cases where we think that a person ought to be in a different location? If Sam, who is hiding in the woods after running away from home, says “It is dark here,” and I think he ought to be in his well-lit living room, I can’t express my disagreement about where he ought to be by saying “No, it is light here.” What explains this difference?

Second, it is not enough for contextualists to argue that in dialogues involving “tasty,” the responses “No” and “That’s false” *can* have the force “I wouldn’t accept a sentence with that Kaplanian character.” They must also argue that these responses *cannot* have the force “I don’t accept that proposition.” Otherwise they will have to concede that there is a reading of this dialogue on which *B* is not contradicting herself (MacFarlane 2014, 10–11):

(8) A: Apples are tasty.

B: That’s false. But apples are tasty.

Here there is a strong contrast with the case of “we” in (7), above. In that case, even if we can make sense of the second student answering, “No, we don’t,” we can also make sense of her answering, “Yes—but we don’t.”

Reply to Wright

I was surprised to find Crispin Wright claiming that I intend no contribution to debates about realism and objectivity. The relativist story about “tasty,” for example, is presented as a rival to

objectivism, expressivism, and contextualism (or “subjectivism,” as it was called in early twentieth-century debates). So surely, if these sorts of theories are making moves in debates about realism and anti-realism, so am I.

As Wright notes, I take the project to be one of descriptive semantic theory. And I grant that not much follows about the ultimate nature of reality from the way we use words. But when a question of realism arises in some domain, it is vital to get clear about the language we use to talk about that domain. If the word “now” is an indexical, for example, then questions about the nature of the *now* are misplaced. The property of tastiness, if there is one, is presumably what we express using our word “tasty,” so getting clear about how that word functions is a necessary prolegomena to any further metaphysics. If a contextualist account of “tasty” were correct, theorizing about the nature of tastiness would be as misplaced as theorizing about the nature of the *now*.

In *Assessment Sensitivity*, I argue that our use of “tasty” is not well explained either by the hypothesis that it is use-sensitive or by the hypothesis that it invariantly expresses an objective property. As Wright notes, appeals to retraction norms are central to my case against contextualist accounts, but they do not help to distinguish relativism from objectivism. Wright concludes that my strategy requires a “metaphysical lemma” to rule out objectivism. But I am not sure why. A metaphysical lemma to the effect that there is no objective property of tastiness would not help to rule out objectivism, as a descriptive semantic theory. We might well speak as if a word expressed an objective property, even if it didn’t; our speech would then involve a misconception. The argument I use to rule out objectivism is a non-metaphysical one. I argue that we do not act as if we take “tasty” to express an objective property. If we did, we would be much more hesitant than we are to call things tasty in cases where we know our peers disagree, and in cases where we expect our own reactions to change in time. Relativism is preferred to objectivism not on metaphysical grounds, but because objectivism requires us to attribute an implausible degree of unreflective chauvinism to speakers.

Wright has no interest in defending objectivism, at least for “tasty” and epistemic modals. His main concern is that I have ignored the possibility of sort of view distinct from objectivism and contextualism: *minimalism*. In addition to recognizing a basically deflationary monadic truth predicate in the object language—as the relativist also does—the minimalist “rejects the idea that any special notion of truth is required in framing a semantic theory” for the discourses in question:

For the minimalist, understanding the practice of these discourses is a matter of understanding the conditions under which their signature statements may be asserted, and the conditions under which such assertions are defeated and should be withdrawn or denied.

Thus, for example, the minimalist accounts for the difference between

(9) This pâté is delicious

and

(10) I like the taste of this pâté

by saying that they “share their assertability conditions but differ in their conditions of retraction.” Many considerations that would “defeat” (9), Wright thinks—for example, evidence of instability in one’s responses or in one’s peer’s responses—would not defeat (10), and that is what their difference consists in.

I disagree with Wright about exactly what sorts of considerations should count as defeating (9). For example, I don’t think that learning that one’s tastes are idiosyncratic obliges one to withdraw (9). But abstracting from these substantive disagreements, minimalism and relativism agree about a central structural point: that (9) and (10) share conditions for warranted assertion but differ in the conditions under which retraction is obliged.¹ Neither contextualist nor objectivist views accept this, so in embracing it minimalism and relativism are in the same corner. What distinguishes them is that relativism derives these predictions from a systematic account of the truth conditions of these sentences, while minimalism does not. Wright asks what is gained by doing things this way—deriving the norms for assertion and retraction from a compositional account of the conditions for sentences to be true as used at a context and assessed from another. And my answer is simple. Expressions like “tasty” can occur in indefinitely many sentential contexts, and we need an account that spits out assertion and retraction conditions for *all* of the sentences in which it occurs, not just simple paradigms. The truth-conditional semantics I sketch does that.

Unlike some other minimalists, Wright acknowledges the need for a compositional semantic theory, and asks us to suppose that, in addition to our minimalist theory, “we have an orthodox compositional semantic theory for the discourse.” But orthodox compositional semantic theories are truth-conditional, and the minimalist eschews such theories. So what are we asked to suppose here? That we have a unorthodox, *non*-truth-conditional semantics—something with a different structure altogether—that yields the requisite assertion and retraction conditions, not just for simple sentences but for complex ones? Well, let us see it, and we can talk. Or, does Wright have in mind a semantic theory that is much like the one I have proposed, but whose governing notion

¹I should note that, although Wright asserts this, it is not easy to see how his talk of “defeaters” entitles him to it. One might suppose that if evidence that one’s reactions are not widely shared counts as a defeater for (9), then it is grounds not only for retracting an earlier assertion of (9), but for refraining from making the assertion in the first place. In that case (9) and (10) would have different conditions for warranted assertion, contrary to what Wright claims.

is *called* something other than “truth”? Surely if the theory is otherwise the same, with the same structure and the same normative consequences, not much can hang on whether the central notion is called “true as used at c and assessed from c' ” or “foo at c/c' .”

References

MacFarlane, John. 2014. *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plunkett, David, and Tim Sundell. 2013. “Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms.” *Philosopher's Imprint* 13.