

No Matter Who: What Makes One a Relativist?

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Abstract. As part of her argument that relativism and contextualism are nothing but notational variants of each other, Stojanovic holds that contextualism is flexible enough to achieve whatever relativism might do if the matter is what truth-value is assigned to each pair of sentence and context. In this paper, I reply to this statement by arguing that contextualism cannot be made as flexible as relativism without in fact turning it into a version of relativism. The key to my response to Stojanovic is that, while relativism relativizes utterance truth, contextualism does not, so parameters that are not fixed at the context of utterance will be accessible for the relativist, but not for the contextualist. Although the relativity of utterance truth follows as soon as propositional truth is relativized to contexts of assessment, as the relativist does, it is easy to lose sight of this fact if we identify the context of assessment with the *assessor's context*. Hence, the point of this paper is that the difference between relativism and contextualism is not one as to whose parameters play a role in determining the sentence's truth-value. If it were, contextualism could indeed be made just as flexible as relativism.

Keywords: Relativism, Contextualism, Truth, Context, Assessment.

1 Introduction

Attempts to explain the particular behavior of sentences featuring predicates of personal taste have resulted in theories such as contextualism (Glanzberg 2007; Schaffer 2011) and relativism (Kölbel 2004; Lasersohn 2005; Recanati 2007; MacFarlane 2014). Stojanovic (2007, 2012), however, claims that relativism and contextualism are nothing but notational variants of each other. In particular, she says, if the matter is what truth-value is assigned to each pair of sentence and context, contextualism is flexible enough to achieve whatever relativism might do (Stojanovic 2012: 627–628). In this paper, I reply to this claim by arguing that contextualism cannot be made as flexible as relativism without in fact turning it into a version of relativism.

The key to my response to Stojanovic is that, while relativism relativizes utterance truth, contextualism does not (López de Sa 2011: 108; Shirreff and Weatherson 2017: 689–690; Ferrari 2019: 481). Thus, parameters that are not fixed at the context of utterance will be accessible for the relativist, but not for the contextualist. The relativity of

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utterance truth follows as soon as propositional truth is relativized to contexts of assessment, as the relativist does. However, it is easy to lose sight of this fact if we identify the context of assessment with the *assessor's context*—if the parameters supplied by the context of assessment are always those of the assessor, contextualism will indeed be able to make them the ones relative to which propositional truth is to be assigned. Hence, the message to take home from this paper is that the difference between relativism and contextualism is not one as to whose parameters play a role in determining the sentence's truth-value. If it were, contextualism could indeed be made just as flexible as relativism, as Stojanovic claims.

2 Contextualism, relativism, and the “notational variant” claim

Contextualism and relativism have been proposed, *inter alia*, as theories about the meaning of predicates of personal taste. Let us consider what would happen when a speaker, let us call her Alice, says “Black pudding is tasty”. According to *indexical contextualism* (see, for instance, Glanzberg 2007; Schaffer 2011), in so doing, Alice expresses a proposition that contains a personal taste standard determined by the context of utterance. According to *nonindexical contextualism* (Kölbel 2004; Recanati 2007), for its part, she expresses a proposition that is true or false only with respect to a personal taste standard determined by the context of utterance. This standard is not part of the proposition but part of the *circumstances of evaluation* (see Kaplan 1977: 502). *Assessor relativism* (Lasersohn 2005; MacFarlane 2014), finally, takes Alice to express a proposition that is true or false only relative to a personal taste standard that is determined not by the context of utterance, but by the *context of assessment*, i.e., the context from which we wonder whether Alice has said something true or false.

Although these theories have been defended as alternatives to each other, Stojanovic (2007, 2012) argues that relativism (which encompasses both the view that I have called “nonindexical contextualism” and the one I have called “assessor relativism”) and contextualism (“indexical contextualism”) are, “from the viewpoint of semantics, not much more than notational variants of one another” (Stojanovic 2007: 691). For it is true that indexical contextualism will assign a particular truth-value to any sentence as uttered in a context, while assessor relativism will be compatible with a variety of truth-values for the same sentence-in-context. But what truth-value we assign to a sentence-context pair is not a matter of semantics. Semantics, as Stojanovic understands it, is “the machinery that maps, in a compositional manner, the sentences of a language to truth-values (as a function of appropriate parameters)” (Stojanovic 2012: 627). Thus understood, relativist and contextualist *semantics* are equivalent. The only difference can be put in terms of what Stojanovic calls “bridging principles” (Stojanovic 2012: 629), which give us a sentence's truth-value at a context of utterance as a function of that sentence's truth-value relative to a certain sequence of parameters. At any rate, discussing which bridging principle we should embrace is not a matter of semantics, but of what Stojanovic calls, following MacFarlane (2003, 2012), “postsemantics”.

A plausible answer to this kind of criticism would be to bite the bullet and just move the whole discussion to the postsemantic level; the question would then be which of these two postsemantic principles accounts better for the linguistic evidence that we

have. Stojanovic, however, thinks that such a discussion would make no sense, for it would depend on the assumption that we need some bridging principle or another. This is the kind of assumption that she rejects—which context determines the relevant parameter is not set once and for all, but is a matter of pragmatics. Different conversational settings can make different contexts, including the speaker’s and the assessor’s, the ones to look at (Stojanovic 2012: 631–632). Stojanovic thinks that this flexibility vindicates her approach.

3 Against the “notational variant” claim

Assessor relativism relativizes propositional truth to contexts of assessment. By doing so, however, it also relativizes utterance truth (see e.g. López de Sa 2011: 108; Shirreff and Weatherston: 689–690; Ferrari 2019: 481). For instance, if Alice’s utterance of the sentence “Black pudding is tasty” expresses a proposition whose truth-value is relative to a context of assessment, the truth of Alice’s utterance itself will be relative—it will not get settled by looking at the utterance alone. This is the feature that makes assessor relativism interestingly different from both indexical and nonindexical contextualism, which can be effectively put at the service of replying to Stojanovic’s claim that contextualism can be made to be just as flexible as relativism.

I think that Stojanovic’s defense of her approach as more flexible than the assessor relativist one stems from assigning indexical contextualism more flexibility than it is in fact capable of, or from assigning assessor relativism less flexibility than it is in fact capable of. It may well be that some contexts of utterance select the standard supplied by a particular context of assessment as the relevant one. However, they will select it once and forever; thus, it will be enough to look at the sentence and the context of utterance to have a truth-value determined. In other words, the standard supplied by the context of assessment will now be part of the context of utterance. Assessor relativism, by contrast, does not make truth depend on the standard supplied by a particular context of assessment, but on the standard that is relevant at the context of assessment, whichever that might be. Since there is only one context of utterance and infinitely many potential contexts of assessment, assessor relativism will still be much more flexible than contextualism. Indexical contextualism is committed to the claim that utterances are true or false once and forever, that is, to *absolutism* about utterance truth.

4 The crux of the difference

When we say that nonindexical contextualism relativizes propositional truth to contexts of utterance and assessor relativism relativizes it to contexts of assessment, it is tempting to understand the difference between these two theories as a difference as to whose standard—the speaker’s or the assessor’s— plays a role in determining the proposition’s truth-value. I think that Stojanovic has this in mind when she claims that relativism and contextualism are nothing but notational variants of each other. However, I think this is misguided, for neither contextualism requires the parameters to be those of the speaker nor relativism requires them to be those of the assessor. For instance, as

Recanati points out, the location that the context of utterance supplies as part of the circumstances of evaluation need not be the location at which the speaker is, but “some other place that is being talked about” (Recanati 2007: 6). Likewise, the context of assessment can supply a parameter that is not the assessor’s. To see this, consider the following case. Alice and Beth are at a restaurant and they are looking at the menu, trying to choose a starter that they can share. However, while Beth came to the restaurant thinking about the delicious food they serve, Alice does not really care about food—she eats just to feel her stomach filled, and does not really have culinary preferences. All she wanted to do was sharing a meal with her friend Beth, no matter what meal it was. It is against this background that Beth says “Black pudding is tasty” and Alice wonders whether Beth has said something true or false. The context from which Alice does this is the context of assessment. It makes no sense, however, for Alice to assess the taste of black pudding against her personal taste standard, since it will not tell her anything. Thus, the only option left for her is to rely on Beth’s taste standard, and say that Beth has spoken truly only if black pudding is tasty relative to that standard.

Contextualism will take utterance truth to be absolute, while relativism will relativize it, only if the context of assessment is not reducible to the assessor’s context. In particular, contextualism will take utterance truth to be absolute even if it takes the *hearer* to play a role in the determination of the truth-value of the proposition expressed, as some versions of it do (see e.g. Harman 1975; Dreier 1990). Once the utterance has been made, the truth-value associated with it will be settled once and forever. Relativism, by contrast, will leave it open what this truth-value is. It may be that the context of assessment tells us to evaluate the proposition’s truth-value with respect to the speaker’s moral standard, for instance, but this will just be what *this* context of assessment tells us to do. Although MacFarlane talks about the assessor’s context and the context of assessment interchangeably, he makes several points that suggest that it is the characterization of the debate between contextualism and relativism advanced here that he has in mind (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014: 61–62).

So, the potential of distinguishing the context of assessment from the assessor’s context is most clearly revealed when we recognize how it can help us locate the difference between relativism and contextualism. If we take the defining characteristic of relativism to be that it relativizes the proposition’s truth-value to the assessor’s parameters, the contextualist will always be able to make her proposal flexible enough so as to introduce these parameters among the ones on which the proposition’s truth-value is to depend. The boundaries between relativism and contextualism will thus blur. If we refuse to identify the context of assessment with the assessor’s context, by contrast, relativism will relativize utterance truth, so no proposal to make contextualism more flexible will make it equivalent to relativism without in fact turning it into a version of relativism. A contextualism-based view that were open to incorporating the assessor’s values for some parameters, thus, would still be a variety of contextualism according to this characterization of the context of assessment.

5 Conclusion

Arguments such as Stojanovic's have successfully made the point that, if the relativist's proposal is to include the assessor's standard in the circumstances of evaluation, contextualism can do just the same. By emphasizing that the context of assessment can determine parameters other than the assessor's, I hope to have bypassed Stojanovic's line of argumentation. Contextualism will never be as flexible as relativism if it keeps considering utterance truth absolute, and it cannot cease to do so without becoming a version of relativism. To say this, we need to understand the difference between contextualism and relativism that the introduction of the context of assessment draws in terms that result in a difference as to the relativization of utterance truth, and this excludes understanding it in terms of the introduction of the assessor's parameters. This is what I have proposed to do in this paper.

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