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Metaethical Contextualism

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1 Metaethical Contextualism: What?

An important function of language is to create and develop interpersonal relationships in communication. In inquiry we share and coordinate our beliefs about how the world is. But we also take a stance and socially orient ourselves toward possible acts, attitudes, and states of affairs. We evaluate possibilities as desirable, appropriate, horrible, trivial, permissible, wonderful. We make demands and grant permissions, emphasize commonality and breed antipathy. In communication we shape our identities as thinkers and feelers in a social world; we coordinate on how to act, what to feel, and whom to be.

Language affords a variety of normative and evaluative resources for doing so. Such resources include modal verbs and adjectives, among others, as in (1)–(2).

- (1) Morally speaking, Sally must give to charity.
- (2) Killing is morally wrong.

Our evaluation of sentences such as (1)–(2) depends on what moral norms we accept. (1) can seem acceptable if you accept moral norms requiring Sally to give to charity, but unacceptable if you accept norms permitting her not to. Some theorists claim that this dependence of our evaluation of (1) on what moral norms we accept derives from a dependence of the interpretation of (1) on a contextually relevant body of norms. Whether (1) is true or false, on these views, can vary across contexts even if everything else in the world — the relevant facts about Sally’s circumstances, available charities, etc. — remains fixed.

Metaethical contextualism (hereafter ‘contextualism’) treats this context-dependence as a dependence of the semantic (conventional) *content* of (1) on features of the context of use, those features that determine a relevant body of moral norms. Contextualism claims that (1) is context-sensitive in the same way as sentences with paradigm context-sensitive expressions — ‘here’, ‘now’, demonstratives (‘this’, ‘that’), pronouns (‘I’, ‘she’), etc. What information is conveyed in uttering (3) depends on which female is most salient in the context.

(3) She won a medal.

In a context where Anna is most salient, uttering (3) communicates that Anna won a medal; but in a context where Betty is most salient, uttering (3) communicates that Betty won a medal. Likewise, according to contextualism, uttering (1) conventionally communicates, roughly, that the relevant moral norms in the conversational context require Sally to give to charity. In a context where Alice’s moral norms N_A are relevant, (1) says that N_A requires Sally to give to charity; but in a context where Bert’s moral norms N_B are relevant, (1) says that N_B requires Sally to give to charity.

Contextualists differ on which norms are “relevant” in different contexts of use. Some theorists say that it is the norms accepted by the speaker (Dreier 1990), some that it is the norms accepted among a larger group or community (Harman 1975, Wong 1984, 2006, Copp 1995, Velleman 2013). Others opt for a more flexible approach (Finlay 2004, 2009, 2014, Silk 2016; *cf.* DeRose 2009). Contextualists also differ on what sort of object normative sentences are relativized to. One might treat normative sentences as sensitive to codes of practice (Copp 1995), standards (Silk 2016), ends (Finlay 2009, 2014), or motivational attitudes (Harman 1975, Dreier 1990), among other things. To fix ideas I will couch the discussion in terms of norms, but nothing substantive hangs on this. So, what unifies contextualist theories is the claim that what a sentence such as (1) conventionally communicates, and hence whether it is true or false, depends on what body of moral norms (standard, code, etc.) is relevant in the conversational context.

The target of this chapter is broadly normative uses of language. By ‘normative use of language’ I mean a use which expresses the speaker’s endorsement of a relevant body of norms or values (*cf.* Gibbard 1990: 33). This includes certain aesthetic uses, moral uses, non-moral evaluative uses, legal uses, etc. Not all uses of expressions such as ‘must’, ‘may’, ‘right’, ‘duty’, ‘beautiful’, etc. are normative in this sense. For instance, the use of ‘must’ in (4) targets a relevant body of information, and the use of ‘can’ in (5) targets the relevant biological and environmental circumstances.

(4) It must be raining outside. Look at all those people with wet umbrellas.

- (5) Polar bears can survive here.

Further, some uses which concern relevant norms or values are merely descriptive. In using ‘have to’ in (6), the speaker is simply reporting what Dwayne’s parents’ rules require; (6) can be paraphrased with an explicit ‘according to’-type phrase, as in (7).

- (6) Dwayne has to be home by 10. Aren’t his parents stupid? I’d stay out if I were him.

- (7) According to Dwayne’s parents’ rules, Dwayne has to be home by 10.

All theories can accept that some uses of ‘must’, ‘wrong’, etc. are context-sensitive in the same way as the pronoun ‘she’ in (3). The distinctive claim of contextualism is that the intuitively *normative* uses, in the above sense — the sorts of uses characteristic of deliberation and planning — are context-sensitive in the same kind of way as (3) and (6). (Hereafter I will use ‘normative language’ as short for ‘normative uses of language’, though the qualification in this paragraph should be kept in mind. Though I will often treat all types of normative uses on a par, it is in principle possible to accept contextualism about certain types of normative language but not others. I will use ‘(meta)ethics’ broadly to cover not just morality but the variety of normative and evaluative domains.)

Contextualism, in this sense, sometimes goes under the heading of ‘Metaethical Relativism’ (Harman 1975, 1996, Dreier 1990). The view has a checkered past. Serious objections have been raised, both on linguistic and on substantive (meta)normative grounds. Many respond by distinguishing the context-sensitivity of normative language from that of paradigm context-sensitive expressions, or by denying that normative language is distinctively context-sensitive at all.

There are two main classes of linguistic data that have been thought problematic for contextualism: first, discourse phenomena involving agreement and disagreement; and second, the interpretation of normative language in certain complex linguistic environments, such as in attitude ascriptions and indirect speech reports. §2 examines the discourse properties of normative language, and presents a standard version of the argument from disagreement. §3 examines the embedding behavior of normative language in ascriptions of normative attitudes. Contextualist theories have largely failed to appreciate the apparent contrasts between normative language and paradigm context-sensitive language. §4 further presses this worry by examining the contextual underspecification characteristic of normative language in conversation. §5 briefly outlines a strategy for implementing what I regard as an improved version of contextualism (developed in Silk 2016).

Although contextualism is a linguistic thesis, contextualist theories are often motivated by broader substantive (meta)normative aims — e.g., to capture the connection between normative judgment and motivation, to avoid positing a realm of distinctively normative properties (facts, truths), and to explain the alleged faultlessness of fundamental normative disagreement. §6 examines the relation between contextualist semantics for normative language, and broader philosophical theorizing about the nature of normativity and the distinctive features of normative discourse and thought.

Finally, §7 concludes by describing several limitations of the present discussion and additional directions for future research.

Before getting started, I would like to make two clarificatory remarks about what kind of context-sensitivity is at-issue in debates about contextualism. First, contextualists sometimes motivate their views by noting that many modal verbs can have different “senses” or “readings” in different contexts, as we saw with (4)–(7). Such context-sensitivity in certain *words*, qua lexical items, is well-known (Kratzer 1977). But it is insufficient for contextualism, in the relevant sense. All parties can accept that (e.g.) ‘must’ is context-sensitive in the sense that context determines what type of reading the modal receives. What is at issue is whether, given a specific type of normative reading — say, moral, as in (1) — some particular body of norms supplied by the context of use figures in the sentence’s semantic content, where what norms are supplied may vary across contexts in the same world. Non-contextualist accounts deny this (more on which below). Debates about contextualism can arise for words whose lexical semantics already fixes a specific reading (e.g., aesthetic for ‘beautiful’) and complex expressions in which the relevant reading is linguistically specified (e.g., ‘morally wrong’).

Second, treating certain normative claims as relativized, in some sense, to relevant norms (standards, ends, etc.) isn’t sufficient for contextualism. What is essential for contextualism is that there be a dependence of semantic *content* on norms determined as a function of the *context of use* (see above). Non-contextualist “relativizing” accounts would deny this — e.g., by positing relativization to norms determined by the circumstances of the *subject*, leading to a kind of invariantism, or to norms determined by a posited *context of assessment*, leading to a kind of relativism (in the sense of John MacFarlane’s work). Informal relativizing claims — like that ‘*x* is wrong’ can be true “relative to” (as applied to, etc.) one person/group but false relative to another — fail to distinguish among the candidate semantic theories. (For this reason it isn’t always clear where many self-described “relativist” views fall on questions of contextualism, relativism, etc. in the present senses of these positions.)

2 Normative Disagreement in Discourse

Contextualists treat a particular body of norms determined by the context of use as figuring in the truth-conditions of a normative sentence. So, to give a proper account of the meaning of normative language, the contextualist must provide a general account of what body of norms is supplied as a function of context and figures in deriving semantic content. This is no different from how a semantics for ‘she’ must provide a general account of what individual is referred to given a context of use c — e.g., that ‘she’ refers to the maximally salient female in c . The putative problem is that, in the case of normative language, there doesn’t seem to be any way of specifying the contextually relevant norms that explains both (a) how we’re in a position to make the normative claims we seem licensed in making (call it the *justified use condition*), and (b) how we can reasonably disagree with one another’s normative claims (call it the *disagreement condition*) (cf. Gibbard 1990, 2003, Kölbel 2002, Lasersohn 2005, Richard 2008, MacFarlane 2014).

Suppose Alice and Bert are considering how much, if anything, morality requires Sally to give to the poor. They agree on all the relevant non-normative facts, like how much Sally earns, how stable her job is, what the needs of the poor are like, and so on. Their question is fundamentally normative: it concerns what moral norms to accept. The following dialogue ensues:

- (8) *Alice:* Morally speaking, Sally must give to charity.
 Bert: No, Sally doesn’t have to give to charity. She can keep what she has for herself and her family and friends.

What body of norms should the contextualist say figures in the interpretation of Alice’s and Bert’s utterances?

Suppose, first, that Alice’s utterance of (1) is just about her moral norms. Assuming Alice is in a position to make a claim about what moral norms she accepts, this captures how Alice is justified in making her normative claim. But it becomes unclear how Bert can reasonably disagree with her. And it becomes unclear how in uttering (9) Bert is disagreeing with Alice, given that they are making claims about their respective moral norms.

- (9) No, Sally doesn’t have to give to charity.

Bert’s denial in (8) is felicitous, whereas B ’s denial in (10) is not.

- (10) *A:* In view of Alice’s moral norms, Sally must give to charity.

B: #No, in view of Bert's moral norms, Sally doesn't have to give to charity.

This puts pressure on the claim that (10a) and (10b) explicitly specify the semantic contents of (1) and (9), respectively.

Suppose instead that we treat normative claims as about a relevant group's norms. Assuming Alice's and Bert's utterances target the same group, this captures how Alice and Bert make inconsistent claims. But it becomes unclear how Alice is in a position to make a claim about whether Sally must give, which, intuitively, she is. It can be appropriate for Alice to utter (1) even if she doesn't know anything about Bert's (or whomever else's) moral views.

In sum, the objection from disagreement is that if we treat normative claims as about the speaker's norms ("speaker contextualism"), we capture the justified use condition but leave the disagreement condition unexplained. But if we treat normative claims as about the norms of a larger group ("group contextualism"), we capture the disagreement condition but leave the justified use condition unexplained. There seems to be no general way of specifying what body of norms is relevant as a function of context that captures all our intuitions.

There is much to say about the nature of disagreement, both in general and about normative matters specifically. For our purposes, we can focus on a certain discourse phenomenon: the *licensing of expressions of linguistic denial* ('no', 'nu-uh', etc.) in dialogues such as (8). Not all cases in which speakers intuitively disagree can be marked in this way. B's "disagreement in attitude" with A in (11) couldn't typically be signaled with a linguistic denial.

- (11) A: I like Mexican food.
B: #No, I don't. I like Thai.

A common contextualist strategy is to try to explain the licensing of expressions of linguistic denial ("LELD") in the *pragmatics*, in terms of non-conventional aspects of the use of normative language in concrete conversations. Many contextualists note that denials can target various non-truth-conditional aspects of utterances (e.g., Björnsson & Finlay 2010: 19–20; Sundell 2011: 275–83; Plunkett & Sundell 2013: 11–22). B's denials in (12)–(13), for instance, target a presupposition and scalar implicature, respectively.

- (12) A: The king of France was at the awards ceremony.
B: No, there is no king of France.
- (13) A: Sally won two medals.
B: No, she won three.

So, the speaker contextualist might say that the proposition targeted by Bert's denial in (8) isn't Alice's "autobiographical report" — the semantic content of her utterance — but rather "the proposition that he would have asserted by uttering the same sentence" (Björnsson & Finlay 2010: 20). One might say that even though, semantically, Alice's utterance just makes a claim about her moral norms, the primary implication Alice intends to convey is a pragmatically related proposition to which Bert is licensed in objecting. One plausible candidate is an implication that Bert ought to conform his moral views to Alice's. It is this implication, the reply continues, which is felicitously targeted by Bert's denial. In uttering (1)/(9), Alice and Bert "pragmatically advocate" (Plunkett & Sundell 2013) for their respective moral views.

Contextualists have been right to emphasize that incompatibility of conventionally asserted content isn't necessary for discourse disagreement. Intuitively, Alice and Bert are disagreeing, not about whether Sally's giving to charity is required by such-and-such norms, but about what norms *to accept*. They are managing their assumptions about what moral norms are operative in the context. Simply noting this, however, is insufficient. The question isn't whether such "metacontextual" negotiations are *possible*. The challenge is to explain why they are so *systematic* with normative language, given that a contextualist semantics is correct (Silk 2014, 2016).

The above contextualist replies posit that the implications systematically targeted by linguistic denials — and affirmations, for that matter — in normative discourse are implications other than the utterances' semantic contents. Yet surprisingly little attention has been given to what specific mechanisms are responsible for this, or how these mechanisms are linguistically constrained — i.e., how the (dis)agreement phenomena can be derived from the specific semantic contents, general conversational principles, and general features of contexts of use, *and* why they can be derived so systematically with normative language but not with paradigm context-sensitive language. When speakers use paradigm context-sensitive expressions ("PCS"-expressions) with different intended asserted contents, the norm isn't disagreement, but talking past. Denials like *B*'s in (14)–(15) are typically infelicitous.

- (14) A: I'm hungry.
 B: #No, I'm not hungry.
- (15) A: That is a cute baby. [said demonstrating *b*]
 B: #No, that isn't a cute a baby. [said demonstrating *b'*]

'I'm hungry' doesn't systematically trigger an implication that the addressee ought to be hungry. 'That [demonstrating *b*] is a cute baby' doesn't systematically trigger

an implication that the addressee ought to be demonstrating *b*. One is left wondering why the assumed pragmatic mechanisms which license linguistic denials with normative language couldn't (and systematically don't) also apply with PCS-expressions. Why should uttering a sentence which conventionally describes given bodies of norms systematically communicate something about what norms to accept? Why would speakers systematically assert "normative propositions" they don't have a "fundamental interest" in (Finlay 2014: 147–50, 184–8, 217–22)? Why would the asserted contents of normative utterances, unlike other utterances, typically not have main point status?

In sum, a prototypical function of normative language is to manage speakers' assumptions about the very features of context on which its interpretation intuitively depends. Normative language contrasts with paradigm context-sensitive language in this respect. The worry is that the distinctive behavior of normative language in discourse is unexpected given the contextualist's semantics. The force of this worry has been underappreciated by contextualists.

3 Normative Attitudes and Attitude Ascriptions

§2 considered various discourse properties of normative language — how context affects the interpretation of normative language, and how normative language is used to change context and manage what norms to accept. A second class of objections to contextualism concerns the interpretation of normative language in certain complex linguistic environments. I will focus on two objections in this area. (For discussion of additional objections, see Silk 2016: ch. 4 and references therein.)

3.1 Characterizing normative states of mind

The first objection is that contextualism mischaracterizes normative states of mind. Call an attitude ascription like (16) with a normative sentence as its complement clause a *normative attitude ascription*.

(16) Alice thinks Sally must give to charity.

Insofar as contextualism treats the contextually relevant norms as figuring in the content of a normative sentence, contextualism would seem to treat (16) as ascribing to Alice the belief that her moral norms require Sally to give to charity. The worry is that this incorrectly treats normative attitudes as states of mind about what norms one accepts.

Consider the following example from Silk 2013 (207–8):

Suppose you encourage Gabriel, your infant brother, to put his fingers into the electrical outlet. Gabriel, smart chap that he is, recoils; his mother has repeatedly scolded him not to do so. You say:

[(17)] Gabriel knows he shouldn't put his fingers into the outlet.

This seems true; you are attributing a certain normative belief to Gabriel. But it is implausible that [(17)] is true only if Gabriel has a belief about his, or anyone else's, normative views. He's just a baby.

As Silk (2013: 208) puts it, "Whether one can represent or take a certain perspective on normative standards is independent of whether one can *have* a normative standard." Likewise, (18) doesn't ascribe to Bert the sort of attitude ascribed in (19):

(18) Bert fears that he must give to charity.

(19) \nexists Bert fears that his/our/whomever's moral views entail that he gives to charity.

Bert's fear is about the moral status of his giving to charity, not about himself or the stringency of his moral views.

So, normative attitude ascriptions don't seem to ascribe meta-attitudes about a relevant individual/group or their norms. They seem to characterize the subject's first-order normative views themselves. (16) characterizes Alice as accepting moral norms which require Sally to give to charity. The challenge is to capture this within a contextualist semantics.

3.2 Factive attitudes

A second objection is that normative language seems to behave differently from paradigm context-sensitive (PCS) language when embedded under factive attitude verbs (Weatherson 2008, Lasersohn 2009) — roughly speaking, verbs which imply the truth of their complements, such as 'know' or 'realize'. (I will bracket whether the implication of the complement is a presupposition or entailment.)

Suppose the contextualist continues to treat (16) as ascribing to Alice the belief that her moral norms require Sally to give to charity. Assume Alice is correct about what her moral views are, so that this belief is true and constitutes knowledge. Nevertheless, if we take Sally's giving to charity to be supererogatory, we may be unwilling to accept (20).

(20) Alice knows that Sally must give to charity.

This is surprising given the contextualist's semantics: if Alice's belief constitutes knowledge, why can't we report it as such? PCS-expressions don't appear to display this sort of behavior. If we accept (21a), and we accept that *S*'s belief that we are philosophers constitutes knowledge, then we cannot coherently reject (21b).

- (21) a. *S* thinks we are philosophers.
- b. *S* knows we are philosophers.

Likewise for PCS-expressions that allow being linked to the attitude subject: Suppose we accept (22a) in a context where 'local' is interpreted, roughly, as "local to Weatherson." Perhaps we think Weatherson is in Ann Arbor, and we attribute to Weatherson the belief that Al is at Ashley's, a bar in Ann Arbor. In such a context, if we accept that Weatherson's belief that Al is at Ashley's constitutes knowledge, there is no inclination to reject (22b).

- (22) a. Weatherson thinks Al is at a local bar.
- b. Weatherson knows Al is at a local bar.

Intuitively, even if Alice's belief that her moral norms require Sally to give to charity constitutes knowledge, we cannot report this using (20) since doing so would seem to commit *us* to requiring Sally to give to charity. But this dual linking — to the discourse context and the attitude subject — seems incompatible with the contextualist's semantics, which requires a specific body of norms to determine the content of the complement clause. If we link 'must' in (20) to Alice's norms, we fail to explain why we resist accepting (20) (still assuming we side with Bert). But if we interpret 'must' with respect to our moral norms, we incorrectly characterize Alice's state of mind. No single body of norms captures both what the truth of (20) commits Alice to and what its felicitous use commits the speaker to.

4 Normative Language and Contextual Felicity

Rather than lexically associating normative language with a specific feature of context, like the speaker, many contextualists opt for a more flexible approach which leaves a role for communicative intentions in determining what norms are supplied (§1). There is an additional challenge for such views which hasn't yet received attention in the literature. This challenge raises interesting general questions about

felicity constraints, accommodation, and interpretive strategies in cases of contextual underspecification. (See Silk 2016 for further discussion.)

Many PCS-expressions impose what Tonhauser et al. 2013 calls a *strong contextual felicity* (SCF) constraint: they cannot be felicitously used if their presuppositions aren't antecedently satisfied in the context. Using 'too' in (23) is infelicitous if we haven't been talking about someone other than Sheila eating out tonight.

(23) #Sheila is eating out tonight, too.

Upon hearing (23), you won't be content to infer that (I think) some relevant person or other, besides Sheila, is eating out tonight. You will object and want to know who. Likewise with (3), as reinforced in (24):

(24) [Context: We are standing opposite three women. You don't know any of them, and you don't think I do either. As far as you're concerned, they are relevantly indistinguishable. I say:]
#She won a medal.

Even after my utterance, none of the three women is more salient than any other. Yet it's not as if my utterance is completely uninformative to you. You can infer that I take one of the women to be most salient, and that whichever woman I take to be most salient won a medal. But you won't rest content with accommodating these inferences. My use of 'she' is infelicitous.

By contrast, I can felicitously utter (1) even if no particular body of moral norms is antecedently salient in the discourse. Upon hearing (1) one would typically be content to infer that (I think) the relevant norms, whatever exactly they are, require that Sally gives to charity. We can make progress in moral inquiry without needing to commit to some particular body of moral norms.

The worry is this: On the type of contextualist semantics we are considering, using normative language assumes a lexically unspecified body of norms, and makes a claim about it. This is precisely analogous to the case of (e.g.) pronouns: using 'she' assumes a certain salient female, and makes a claim about her. Why, then, in cases of contextual underspecification, are interlocutors content to accommodate with normative language, but not with (e.g.) pronouns? If normative language is given the same kind of semantic analysis as (e.g.) pronouns, whence the contrast in felicity conditions?

5 Managing Context in Language Use

The theme of §§2–4 is that there seem to be important differences between normative language and paradigm context-sensitive language, as concerning their discourse properties, embedding behavior, and felicity conditions. These differences put pressure on the claim that normative language and paradigm context-sensitive language are semantically context-sensitive in the same general kind of way. Many contextualists have responded by positing linguistically unconstrained interpretive mechanisms and *ad hoc* pragmatic principles. What is needed, however, and what existing contextualist accounts have failed to provide, is a detailed explanation of the distinctive features of normative language in terms of specific features of their conventional meaning and general interpretive and pragmatic principles. Providing such an account is, in my view, the central challenge for contextualism.

Some theorists have responded by distinguishing the context-sensitivity of normative language from that of PCS-expressions, adopting relativist or expressivist semantics (Gibbard 1990, 2003, Kölbel 2002, Silk 2013, MacFarlane 2014). Others deny that normative language is distinctively context-sensitive, adopting realist invariantist semantics. Though such non-contextualist theories may avoid the sorts of worries canvassed in §§2–4, they face non-trivial burdens of their own — for instance, for the relativist and expressivist, to provide accounts of assertion, belief, and truth; for the invariantist, to provide positive evidence that specific substantive (meta)normative views are encoded in the conventional meaning of normative language. Some of these burdens have begun to be addressed, but accounts are often admittedly incomplete.

In the remainder of this section I would like to briefly outline what I regard as a more promising contextualist strategy of reply, developed in greater detail elsewhere (Silk 2016). This should give a flavor for the kinds of explanatory resources available to the contextualist going forward.

First, observe that, contrary to initial appearances, many PCS-expressions exhibit the same sorts of puzzling linguistic behavior seen with normative language (Silk 2014, 2016). Consider discourse disagreement. Suppose Amanda and Billy are playing with three children, two white and one non-white. Amanda is a racist against non-whites, and Billy knows this. The two white children, Will and Wilma, are laughing, and the one non-white child, Nick, isn't. Amanda says:

(25) Look, the children (/they) are laughing!

Roughly, (25) says that everyone in the most salient group of children is laughing.

So, insofar as Amanda intends to say something true, it is mutually obvious that she is assuming that the most salient group of children includes only Will and Wilma. Since it is mutually accepted that there would be no non-racist grounds for treating Nick as less salient than Will and Wilma, Amanda's utterance of (25) thus implicitly suggests that Nick's being non-white is a sufficient reason not to be talking about him. If Billy doesn't object to Amanda's utterance, he will accommodate her in this assumption. This can set the stage for further exclusionary behavior in the future.

To avoid such a consequence, Billy might object by explicitly calling out Amanda on her assumption; he might say something like, 'Wait a minute, why are you ignoring Nick?' But Billy needn't be so explicit; he might say:

(26) No, the children (/they) *aren't* laughing. Nick is bored out of his mind.

Insofar as Billy intends to say something true, it is mutually obvious that he intends his use of 'the children' to pick out a group that includes Nick. In uttering (26) Billy acts in a way which assumes that Nick *is* included in the group under discussion, and thus that Nick isn't to be ignored simply because of his race. This can lead to (implicit or explicit) negotiation about which children are salient and why.

Or consider factive attitude ascriptions. Suppose Billy accepts (27) in a context where 'the children' is linked to Amanda's belief state.

(27) Amanda thinks the children are laughing.

Though Billy accepts (27), and (let's suppose) he accepts that Amanda's belief that Will and Wilma are laughing constitutes knowledge, he may resist accepting (28).

(28) Amanda knows the children are laughing.

After all, Billy might say, the children *aren't* laughing; Nick is bored out of his mind.

Similar examples can be constructed with other PCS-expressions. The relevant observations: The intended contents of Amanda's and Billy's utterances in (25)–(26) are compatible, and yet they disagree. Uttering (28) can express Billy's assumptions about the contextual features determining the content of 'the children'; this can be the case even when the content of the attitude is determined in light of Amanda's state of mind. What these examples highlight is that although what is typically relevant in uses of PCS-expressions is their truth-conditional content, rather than what their use assumes about the features of context which determine that content, this generalization isn't without exception.

This illuminates a strategy for developing contextualism. Perhaps by examining what distinguishes the exceptional cases with PCS-expressions, such as (25)–

(28), we can learn something about the distinctive discourse properties of normative language. Drawing on work in artificial intelligence, Silk 2016 argues that the sort of context-management we see with certain uses of context-sensitive expressions is characteristic of collaborative action generally. The appropriateness of our actions often requires that circumstances are a certain way. *In acting*, we can exploit our mutual world knowledge and general abductive reasoning skills to communicate information and manage our assumptions about these circumstances. By acting in such a way that is appropriate only if the context is a certain way, one can implicitly propose that the context be that way. If the other party accommodates by proceeding in like manner, it can become taken for granted that the context is that way. If she doesn't, this can lead to negotiation over the state of the context. This can all happen without explicitly raising the issue of what the context is like. The linguistic case — the case of linguistic action, and interpretation — can be seen as a special instance of these phenomena. Using context-sensitive language presupposes that the concrete context determines a value for the relevant contextual parameter (body of norms, salience ordering, etc.) that renders one's utterance true and appropriate. Speakers can then integrate their mutual grammatical knowledge and general pragmatic reasoning skills to manage their assumptions about the very features of context that determine the intended contents of their uses of context-sensitive expressions.

The contextualist, of course, cannot stop here. The challenge isn't just to explain how speakers *can* communicate information about what norms context supplies in using normative language. It is also to explain the *systematicity* with which normative language, unlike paradigm context-sensitive language, is used in this way. But the above observations provide the basis for conversational explanations of the relevant differences among context-sensitive expressions. Silk 2016 argues that many of these differences can be derived from the sentences' specific contents (truth-conditional *and* presupposed) and typical features of conversations — e.g., concerning questions under discussion, speakers' (extra-)conversational goals, and speakers' substantive normative views. The account, called *Discourse Contextualism*, is extended to capture the behavior of normative language in various complex linguistic environments (e.g., attitude ascriptions, conditionals), drawing on independent principles of local interpretation. Whether the approach will ultimately succeed or prove superior to alternative non-contextualist theories remains to be seen. At minimum, examining the broader phenomena promises to shed light on more general issues concerning (e.g.) the varieties of context-sensitivity in natural language, the nature and origins of presupposition, the role of context in communication and collaborative action, and the relations among truth, meaning, and assertion.

6 Metaethics in Metaethical Contextualism

So far we have been focusing on metaethical contextualism as a *linguistic* thesis. But what originally motivated the view — and what has kept many metaethicists attracted to it — aren't primarily linguistic issues, but substantive philosophical issues about the metaphysics of normative properties, the nature of normative knowledge, and the psychology of normative judgment. In this section I will briefly consider several oft-perceived *metaethical* payoffs of adopting a contextualist semantics. I will suggest that the relation between the semantic issues and the broader dialectic in metaethics is less straightforward than is often assumed.

A first common motivation for contextualism concerns the psychology of normative judgment (Harman 1975, Dreier 1990, Finlay 2004, 2014; contrast Wong 2006: ch. 7). We typically take people to have at least some motivation to act in accordance with their sincere normative judgments. Suppose we are talking about the plights of starving children worldwide. Alice says that we must donate to Oxfam, and, just then, Oxfam calls. If Alice proceeds to express complete indifference to donating, we might question whether she was sincere in her previous judgment. Normative judgments are *practical*; they are *for action*.

Contextualism, it seems, has a straightforward explanation. If (29) entails that the speaker endorses norms which enjoin donating to Oxfam, then one won't sincerely utter (29) unless one's own norms enjoin donating.

(29) I must donate to Oxfam.

Moreover a belief ascription like 'Alice thinks she must donate to Oxfam' won't be true — or, semantically descending, it won't be the case that Alice thinks she must donate to Oxfam — unless Alice endorses norms which enjoin donating (or at least unless Alice thinks she endorses such norms (§3.1)). So, if endorsing norms requiring one to ϕ is the sort of state of mind which motivates one to ϕ , there will be an intimate connection between thinking one must ϕ and being motivated to ϕ .

A second common motivation for contextualism concerns the metaphysics, epistemology, and metasemantics of normative thought and talk (Wong 2006, Finlay 2009, 2014). A challenge for non-contextualist descriptivist semantics is to explain what aspect of reality normative sentences describe, what its metaphysical relation is to other features of reality, and how we come to think, know, and talk about it. Adopting contextualism seems to provide a way of avoiding such questions. One needn't posit a realm of distinctively normative properties or facts for normative thought and talk to be about. What normative sentences describe are just bodies

of norms or states of mind. The metaphysics, epistemology, and metasemantics of normative thought and talk are no more puzzling than the metaphysics, epistemology, and metasemantics of thought and talk about bodies of norms (e.g., what is required according to utilitarianism) or psychologies (e.g., what norms Alice accepts). Further, by maintaining a descriptivist semantics, the contextualist can still integrate her treatment of normative language with standard views on (e.g.) assertion, informational and representational content, semantic explanation, logic, truth, and compositional semantics. This affords a potential advantage over theories, like expressivism or relativism, which call for revising our understanding of (at least some of) these issues. Contextualism can thus be of interest to theorists who are compelled by the idea that normative thought and talk essentially depends, in some sense, on context, but who also have reservations about broader implications of revisionary theories.

A third motivation for contextualism concerns cases of fundamental normative disagreement (Wong 1984, 2006, Harman 1996; contrast Velleman 2013). Some theorists have claimed that at least some fundamental normative disagreements seem “faultless,” or at least not rationally resolvable. In (8), the intuition would be that though Alice and Bert disagree, which licenses Bert’s use of ‘no’, neither of them need be making any cognitive mistake. Though contextualism doesn’t itself require accepting this idea, certain versions of contextualism provide ways of accommodating it. For example, the speaker contextualist might treat Alice and Bert’s dispute as faultless in the sense that both speakers’ assertions are true, and locate the disagreement in conflicting preferences. However, it is contentious how robust intuitions of apparent faultless disagreement are in various normative domains, and whether the general notion of faultless disagreement is even coherent (Wright 2001, MacFarlane 2014: 133–6).

If contextualism is a thesis about the conventional meaning and use of a certain fragment of natural language, it may seem surprising that the view is often advanced with substantive (meta)normative considerations in mind. Prior to theorizing, one might not have expected the linguistic issues and the broader philosophical issues to be so closely intertwined. I would like to make two points about this.

First, perhaps contrary to initial appearances, accepting contextualism doesn’t *itself* require taking a stand on the above sorts of metaethical issues. Take the connection with motivation. The crucial move in the above remarks was this: *if* norm-acceptance is a motivating attitude, then there will be an intimate connection between (e.g.) asserting or thinking that one must ϕ and being motivated to ϕ . This antecedent locates a place for theorizing about the nature of norm-acceptance, and hence about the nature of the connection between normative judgment and mo-

tivation. Does accepting norms which require one to ϕ essentially involve being motivated to ϕ ? If not, what conditions provide exceptions? Does norm-acceptance at least essentially involve having certain motivational dispositions or emotional capacities? The semantics is thus compatible with a range of views on the psychology of judgments characteristically expressed and ascribed using normative language (Silk 2016: §§5.3–5.4).

Similarly, a contextualist semantics is compatible with a range of views on the nature of normativity and the metaphysics of normative properties (Silk 2016: §§3.6, 5.4, 7.4). Compositional semantics takes as given an assignment of values to variables and other context-sensitive expressions. Compositional semantics with normative language thus, according to contextualism, takes as given a specific body of norms which figures in calculating the conventional contents of complex expressions. This leaves open the question of what makes it the case about a *concrete* context that it determines such-and-such norms for interpretation. This broadly *metasemantic* question locates a place for theorizing about the nature of, and relations among, the norms supplied across contexts. For instance, consider questions about the universality of morality. To capture common “relativist” claims, one could say that different concrete contexts can determine different moral norms. Conflicting moral judgments about a particular case could thus both be true. Those who defend the objectivity of morality would deny this. They could identify the relevant moral norms as the correct moral norms, determined independently of particular speaker intentions. If a universal moral standard was correct, the same moral norms would be supplied in all contexts. Importantly, however, this would be a substantive (meta)normative matter rather than something built into the conventional meaning of moral language (as on certain invariantist semantics).

Of course, given that contextualism is neutral on these sorts of issues, it is *possible* to integrate it with a more internalist moral psychology, parsimonious metaphysics, etc. But — and this is my second point — this needn’t provide contextualism with an *advantage* over non-contextualist semantics. For there are ways of doing so within alternative frameworks as well (Silk 2013, 2016: §§5.4, 6.3.3). According to relativism (in the sense of John MacFarlane’s work), normative sentences are evaluated for truth/falsity with respect to the norms determined by a posited context of assessment, rather than the context of use. The above sorts of metaethical questions would be located in the *postsemantics* of what makes it the case about a context of assessment that such-and-such norms are in force. Similarly, invariantism encodes into the lexical semantics that the relevant norms are determined solely by the world of evaluation. Different bodies of norms would then correspond to different languages, i.e. fully formally precise languages (Lewis 1975). The above

sorts of metaethical questions would be located in the *presemantics* of what makes it the case about a linguistic community that such-and-such language is being spoken (e.g., that the string ‘w-r-o-n-g’ corresponds to the lexical item ‘wrong’ which denotes such-and-such property *P*).

The upshot, I take it, is that doing semantics for normative language — theorizing about its conventional meaning and use — can, and arguably should, be neutral on certain broader metaethical issues often used to motivate metaethical contextualism. Distinguishing the latter issues from the semantics proper can free up our (meta)normative inquiries (*cf.* Forrester 1989: chs. 2, 13; Silk 2013, 2016). This can motivate clearer answers and a more refined understanding of the space of overall theories. How exactly the various issues interact and mutually constrain theorizing may be more complicated than initially seemed.

7 Further Issues

In closing I would like to briefly describe several additional issues bearing on developments of metaethical contextualism.

First, I have focused on context-sensitivity concerning which body of norms is supplied for interpreting normative language. But there are other respects in which normative language can be sensitive to context. Notably, it can also be sensitive to a contextually relevant body of information (Kolodny & MacFarlane 2010, Parfit 2011). We can ask not only what one ought to do in light of all the facts, known and unknown, but also about one ought to do in light of available information. A *contextualist* about the latter talk treats the relevant information as supplied by the context of use and as figuring in deriving semantic content. Issues parallel to those from §§2–5 arise for contextualism about information-sensitivity.

Second, normative language isn’t limited to a single syntactic category. There are normative uses of modal verbs (‘must’, ‘may’), adjectives (‘right’, ‘wrong’), and nominals (‘obligation’, ‘requirement’). Though these types of expressions may all seem apt for a contextualist treatment if any are, they differ in important respects. It is non-trivial how precisely to implement a contextualist account in each case in the syntax and compositional semantics. Integration with general linguistic work on modals, adjectives, etc. is essential.

Third, though it is common in discussions of metaethical contextualism to focus on moral uses, there are many kinds of broadly evaluational language. A distinction is sometimes made between deontic terms (‘must’, ‘permissible’) and evaluative terms (‘good’, ‘bad’), but there are also relevant sub-categories — expressions of

aesthetics ('beautiful'), taste ('tasty'), desirability ('wonderful'), humor ('hilarious'), etc. Though these exhibit much of the same distinctive linguistic behavior discussed above, there are non-trivial differences among them — e.g., concerning performativity, multidimensionality, and embedding behavior (Silk 2016: ch. 7). Many of these differences are not yet well-understood. Integration with research on linguistic expressives (Potts 2005) — epithets, slurs, honorifics, etc. — promises fruitful avenues to explore.

Fourth, there is a range of expressions exhibiting the apparently distinctive kind of context-sensitivity exhibited by normative language. Recent debates have targeted epistemic vocabulary, predicates of personal taste, and gradable adjectives, among others (Egan et al. 2005, Lasersohn 2005, Richard 2008, DeRose 2009, MacFarlane 2014, Silk 2016). More systematic investigation of the precise similarities/differences among them, as well as among context-sensitive expressions more generally, is needed (*cf.* Tonhauser et al. 2013, Silk 2016). Metaethical inquiry into context-sensitivity in normative language can thus be seen as part of the larger body of research on the varieties of context-sensitivity in interpretation.

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Related Topics

5 Expressivism, 7 Relativism, 12 Deontic modals and metaethics, 15 Hybrid expressivism, 19 Cognitivism and non-cognitivism, 33 The epistemic significance of ethical disagreement, 34 Metasemantics and metaethics

Further Reading

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