

Contextualism, Pragmatism and Provincialism

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January 14, 2011

Abstract. The recent flowering of “contextualist” doctrines is widely viewed as a natural consequence of a shift to a more pragmatic perspective on meaning, in which the communicative and expressive context of an utterance is seen as playing a more thoroughgoing role in shaping meaning than had previously been acknowledged. But in fact, mainstream contextualist doctrines seem to follow from the new pragmatic orientation only given dubious assumptions about the relevant features of communicative and expressive contexts. This charge is developed through consideration of a widely accepted contextualist treatment of the word “rich”, here called *economic contextualism*. The case against economic contextualism involves detailed examination of empirical and theoretical issues of a sort that have been ignored in the contextualist literature. The final sections of the paper indicate how arguments of this character might be applied to other forms of contextualism and trace some of their general implications, including the threat they pose to contextualist approaches to skeptical puzzles, and the space they open for views that allow for pervasive context-sensitivity but are quite far from the doctrines currently advanced under the “contextualist” banner.

§1. Economic contextualism

Mark Richard (2004) asks us to imagine two acquaintances of a certain Mary, Naomi and Didi, who have each independently learned that Mary has won a million dollars in the lottery. Didi is impressed by Mary's windfall, and says to one of her friends, "Mary is rich." Naomi, who moves in more rarified circles, says to one of her friends, "Mary is not rich at all." According to Richard, both Naomi and Didi have probably spoken the truth: "it is very plausible that the truth of their claims about wealth turns on whatever standards prevail within their conversations" (2004, p. 218).

Call this view *economic contextualism*:

Economic contextualism. The truth conditions of an assertion of a sentence of the form "S is rich" align with the standards for the application of "rich" prevailing within the conversation to which the assertion belongs.

Richard is not especially interested in economic contextualism in and of itself: he just wants an uncontroversial contextualist doctrine to help frame questions about the relationship between contextualism and relativism. Appeal to the alleged obviousness of contextualism about "rich" is a common expository device in the literature. For example, Wedgwood (2008, p. 2) tell us that "a contextualist view of the term 'rich' seems overwhelmingly plausible," setting the stage for his defense of a parallel view about terms of epistemic justification. And Raffman (1994, p. 175) uses "rich" as her first example of the "datum" that vague predicates are context-sensitive. In each case, these writers endorse a view of "rich" identical in essential respects to Richard's economic contextualism. And in each case, their interests lie elsewhere: in general philosophical morals to be drawn, or in analogous contextualist doctrines about more philosophically significant topics.

Despite this widely shared sense of its obviousness, there are very good reasons for think-

ing that economic contextualism is false. The development of this case requires a detailed examination of considerations of a character that contextualists in both philosophy and linguistics tend to ignore completely. Their failure to attend to these considerations constitutes a fundamental failing of the contextualist literature as it currently stands.

This paper is a contribution to what is arguably the central project of current philosophy of language: to understand the nature and extent of the context-sensitivity of meaning. Broadly speaking, the meaning attached to a particular use of a natural language has two sources. One is the relatively fixed and stable meanings that the used expressions have in the language. The other is the communicative and expressive context, encompassing all the interests, aims, beliefs, presuppositions, projects, and so on, of the parties to the utterance that help determine the point and significance the utterance has for them. The last 25 years or so have seen a gradual shift of perspective amongst philosophers and linguists, in which factors of the second kind have come to be seen as playing a much more thoroughgoing role in shaping the meaning associated with an utterance than had been acknowledged in work in the early decades of formal natural-language semantics. We might call this shift in perspective the *pragmatic turn*.

The flowering of contextualist doctrines in recent years is widely viewed as a natural consequence of this shift. I aim in this paper to show that, to the contrary, mainstream contextualist doctrines are not a natural or automatic deliverance of the pragmatic turn—indeed, that the sorts of consideration that the pragmatic turn ought to lead us to attend to can and do speak *against* such doctrines. The widespread perception to the contrary is a function of superficial and wrongheaded assumptions about the relevant features of the communicative and expressive context. This state of affairs is difficult to see in the abstract. Hence we will focus on its manifestation in economic contextualism.

In §2 and §3, I develop the conceptual groundwork for the issues that will concern us. In §4, I make the case against economic contextualism. In §5, I trace out general implications of

that discussion. One negative implication is that the prospect for “contextualist solutions” to problems like skepticism is put in doubt. One positive implication is that there is ample room for views that warrant the name “contextualism” but look very little like the doctrines currently advanced under this label.

§2. The structure and content of contextualist doctrines

Elements of the formulation of economic contextualism warrant explanation. Part of the point of doing so is to get clearer on the view that I am about to critique at some length. But economic contextualism is of interest for us because it exemplifies a much larger class of contextualist doctrines. Consideration of these elements of the formulation will help bring into view that class, and will indicate how I will situate my discussion in relationship to some broad disputes in the literature about how best to understand these doctrines.

I will address three aspects of the formulation: 1) the talk of assertions, 2) the talk of truth-conditions, and 3) the talk of the standards of application prevailing in a conversation.

2.1 Semantic contextualism vs. speech-act contextualism

Contextualist doctrines are often understood as claims about the context-dependence of *semantic content*: content that is fully under the control of *expression meaning*, the meanings linguistic expressions have ‘in the language’ and so independently of this or that occasion of use. This formulation is meant to leave open that the semantic content expressed by a sentence on an occasion of utterance can be context dependent; the point is that if it is context dependent, that will be because the meanings of expressions in the sentence determine what the context of utterance is to contribute. And this talk of control or determination by expression meaning can be glossed in turn by the methodological presumption that a formal meaning-theory of the language will systematically account for the posited contributions from

context in its axioms concerning basic expressions or modes of composition. The theory of indexicals in Kaplan (1989) is a familiar example of such a treatment.

Construed as a claim about semantic content, a contextualist doctrine is in principle open to the objection that no acceptable theory of the meanings of the relevant expressions will provide for the alleged forms of context dependence. So for example, Stanley (2004) argues against epistemological contextualism on the ground that “know” does not fit into any familiar category of context-sensitive expression. (He focuses in particular on arguing that “know” is not gradable.)

In response to Stanley, Stainton (2010) points out that epistemological contextualists tend to formulate contextualism as a thesis about what is “claimed”, “stated” or “asserted” in a knowledge attribution. This observation leads Stainton to suggest that the “spirit of contextualism”, is the view that “what is claimed/stated/asserted” in a knowledge attribution depends upon the attributor’s standards; in particular, it will not remain constant between the “high-standards” context of discussions of philosophical skepticism and the “low-standards” contexts more frequently encountered in ordinary life (2010, pp. 145–148). So construed, epistemological contextualism is a view about *speech-act content*, specifically the content of an assertion (statement, claim).¹

Now suppose we have reason to think that the assertive content of a knowledge attribution needn’t be fixed by the semantic content (or, in Stainton’s terminology, the “saturated expression meaning”) of the sentence used to make the attribution. Then we do not need to insist that the contextual variations we descry in the assertive content show up at the level

¹In what follows, I am also going to assume that talk of “what is said” by a speaker in uttering a sentence captures speech-act content, and so that in the assertive case what is said is not to be distinguished from what is claimed or asserted. There are reasons to think that “say” plays, or can play, a different role than this (see Camp, 2006). But it seems to me a sensible use of the principle of charity to interpret contextualist philosophers who have denied that ‘what is said’ is determined by semantics as having in mind the content of an assertion (statement, claim). (Sometimes contextualists are explicit about this intent: see the discussion of Travis in §3; see also Soames 2010, ch. 7.) And so I will assume this assimilation for purposes of exposition.

of semantic content, and Stanley's points would be simply irrelevant. Stainton summarizes the line of thought thusly:

My main thesis, recall, is this: *If* there are pragmatic determinants of what is asserted/stated, *and* contextualism can overcome independent problems not having to do specifically with the context sensitivity of the word 'know', *then* the spirit of contextualism can be salvaged. Even if 'know' isn't a context sensitive word. (Stainton, 2010, p. 145)

By "pragmatic" here, Stainton means extra-semantic. And he thinks the literature on "free pragmatic enrichment" suggests we do indeed have good reason to think the first of his antecedents is satisfied.

I think Stainton is right about the spirit of contextualism, and not just of epistemological contextualism. For one thing, he is right that contextualists tend to speak of what is claimed or stated or asserted by the utterances that interest them. (Recall Richard's remark, quoted above, that "the truth of their claims about wealth turns on whatever standards prevail within their conversations.") But the point is not primarily one about the ways in which contextualists explicitly couch their doctrines, which, it is fair to say, often indicate excessive casualness about the possibility of a distinction between speech-act and semantic content. More significantly, and as will emerge in the forthcoming discussion, a central line of argument for contextualism is most plausible if we interpret the alleged conclusion of that line to concern speech-act content. Interpretive charity thus suggests speech-act interpretations of economic contextualism and the other contextualist doctrines I will discuss.

Of course, there is still the question of how to understand the relationship between assertive content and semantic content, and so of whether Stainton's suggestion really does immunize contextualism from linguistically-driven objections like Stanley's. What one asserts does not simply float free of the meanings of the expressions one uses, and so someone

who endorses Stainton's position ought to have some view about the role to be played by the semantic. I will not pursue that issue here. But even if we were to conclude in the end that assertive content cannot be detached from semantic properties of asserted sentences in the manner Stainton envisions, and so that, for example, couching epistemological contextualism as a thesis about assertive content does not shield it from Stanley's criticism, that criticism would remain not fully satisfying. For it would show that epistemological contextualism is wrong without showing what is wrong with the arguments that led to it. A truly illuminating critical treatment of a contextualist doctrine, as of any philosophical thesis about anything, must start earlier, not with the conclusions drawn but with the reasons that have been given for drawing them.

2.2 Content contextualism vs. COE contextualism

Both Stainton and Stanley, in the context of the dispute just outlined, assume that contextualist doctrines are claims about the context-dependence of content. Be it semantic or assertive, what is taken to vary as a function of context is content. John MacFarlane (2007) has argued for the possibility of reinterpreting familiar forms of contextualism, such that these doctrines posit contextual dependencies not of content but of *circumstances of evaluation*.

Some content-bearing items—sentences, speech acts, beliefs, etc.—can possess truth values. Call the kind of contents such items possess *propositional contents*. We might also think of a propositional content itself as apt for possessing a truth value. What, besides the content itself, determines a propositional content's truth value (or, equivalently, the truth value of items that bear the content)? On a traditional conception, we need only one other element: the world, the totality of how things are. Whether what I assert in saying "I am cold" is true depends on nothing other than what I assert and the way the world is—in particular, on whether I am in fact cold. The circumstance of evaluation of what I assert, that which

must be fixed if the content of my assertion is to have a truth value, consists just of the world. On a natural generalization of this view, we think of the world as one possible world among others, and then allow contents to be evaluated for truth at other possible worlds. Circumstances of evaluation are thus conceived as possible worlds.²

The traditional picture can be rejected. For example, one might hold that propositional contents are to be evaluated for truth at a world and time pair, or at a world, time and place triple. This proposal opens the possibility that the assertion I made a few days ago when, looking out the window of my Chicago apartment, I said “It’s raining”, has the same content as (let’s pretend) the assertion that Hillary Clinton made last year when, looking out her hotel window in Jerusalem, she said, “It’s raining”, despite my assertion being true and hers false. On the traditional conception, two assertions made at the same world can differ in truth value only if they differ in content. But on the current proposal, the difference in truth value might stem not from a difference in content, nor in a difference in world, but in the assertions being appropriately evaluated for truth at the respective times and places of their contexts of utterance.

Kaplan wanted times in circumstances of evaluation for semantic and logical reasons: he believed that natural languages have temporal operators. A different motivation for views of this character, emerging from the philosophy of mind, concerns the role of ascriptions

²What I have called the traditional conception is often associated with the idea that truth is absolute, in the sense that truth-evaluable items are true or false *simpliciter*. The move to conceiving circumstances of evaluation as possible worlds, and thus allowing for a multiplicity of them, might seem at odds with this idea—if a content can be true relative to one circumstance of evaluation and false relative to another, what basis remains for thinking of truth as absolute? But there is a way to answer this question. We can identify truth *simpliciter* with truth at the actual world (Evans, 1985, p. 351). Indeed, we can hold that the fundamental notion is that of truth *simpliciter*: to say that it is true, at the actual world, that Obama is the 44th President of the United States, is just to say that it is true that Obama is the 44th President of the United States. And so that Obama might not have been the 44th President—and that there is then an accessible possible world at which he is not—does not make it any less the case that it is true, period, that Obama is the 44th President. Note that a comparable move is not available once we introduce further parameters into the circumstances of evaluation such as time or place. There is no *fixed* privileged value for these parameters, as there is with the possible-worlds parameter, such that we can say that truth *simpliciter* is truth at that value.

of propositional attitudes in psychological explanation. Whereas a neo-Fregean like Evans or McDowell might hold that individuating propositional contents by their profile across possible worlds yields too *few* contents to accommodate the rationality of certain patterns of attitudes, some “internalists” have argued that the traditional conception yields too *many* contents to keep in clear view psychological generalizations about, say, how given attitudes yield given behaviors (c.f. Recanati, 2007, p. 84). MacFarlane’s suggestion, on behalf of contextualists, is that we can use the possibility of an expanded circumstance of evaluation for yet a further purpose: to account for the contextual changes in truth values to which contextualists allegedly bring our attention. We can, for example, posit a standard-of-wealth parameter as part of the circumstance of evaluation of an assertion of a sentence of the form, “S is rich”. The differences in truth value claimed by economic contextualists might then be chalked up to the dependence of this parameter, rather than of content, upon the context of utterance.

I will call the approach to which MacFarlane draws our attention *COE contextualism*, and its opposite *content contextualism*. This distinction can be applied to speech-act no less than semantic contextualism. Between this subsection and the last we have thus arrived at four possible versions of contextualism: semantic-content contextualism, semantic-COE contextualism, speech-act-content contextualism, and speech-act-COE contextualism.

I think COE contextualism is unappetizing, largely because I think the traditional picture has more to be said for it than does MacFarlane. And COE contextualism is certainly a minority position among actual contextualists. But as the objections I will be making apply regardless of which of the two options is adopted by contextualists, it would be pointless for me to take a stand on which is the ‘right’ option. Accordingly, I will endeavor to gloss over the difference between them. Let’s stipulate that truth conditions are functions from possible worlds to truth values (or, if preferred, that they are items that determine such functions). Consider a sentence, or an assertion thereof, in a context of utterance—thinking

of context untechnically as the real-world surroundings of a given use of language, and thus as apt for fixing both a context technically speaking (a set of parameters) and a circumstance of evaluation (which is, of course, another set of parameters). Suppose we wish to think of a sentence, or assertion thereof, as having a truth condition. Then both content and COE contextualist doctrines will claim that the truth conditions possessed by the sentence or assertion will be dependent upon, and relative to, context of utterance (keeping in mind the relevant notion of context), and moreover, the two versions of a given contextualist doctrine will claim exactly the same patterns of truth-conditional assignment. For example, both speech-act-content economic contextualism and speech-act-COE economic contextualism will claim that the truth conditions of an assertion of a sentence of the form “S is rich” vary with the standard-of-wealth parameter determined by the context of utterance. The views differ in where this parameter is to be located in the over-all framework of items that determine truth value. But, except in a few places that I will flag, this difference won’t matter for the discussion to come. Accordingly I will, so far as is possible, couch the discussion in terms of truth conditions.

2.3 Prevailing conversational standards

One final aspect of the formulation of economic contextualism bears mention, and indeed will be of crucial importance for our discussion. I take the terminology of “prevailing conversational standards” from Richard. But what is its significance?

One initial point is crucial: when Richard says that different standards “prevail within [Naomi’s and Didi’s] conversations”, he does not thereby mean that “rich” utterances have different truth conditions in the two conversations. That interpretation of the talk of conversational standards would render trivial the claim that “the truth of their claims about wealth turns on whatever standards prevail within their conversations”. So interpreted, this claim is not merely, as Richard says, “very plausible”; it is vacuous. Granted, the economic con-

textualist wants to hold that truth conditions align with conversational standards. But that is a substantive claim only if what it is for a given standard to prevail in a given conversation is something other than utterances in that conversation having certain truth conditions. And it is not difficult, at least at a suitable degree of abstraction, to see the alternative: a prevailing conversational standard is, constitutively, not a condition of *truth*, but a feature of *use*, of *application*, of *practice*. In general, when contextualists speak, as they often do, of a “speaker’s standards” (or a discursive group’s standards), we should presume that what are at issue are standards that are to be found in the speaker’s (or discursive group’s) actual use of the relevant expressions—in their practice as it stands.

There are various ways to fill out this idea.

- (i) *Dispositional*. The prevailing standards in a conversation are constituted by the participants’ dispositions. For example, suppose that there is some range of degrees of wealth such that participants in Didi’s conversation are disposed to apply “rich”, and to judge true applications of “rich”, to people with those degrees of wealth, and that they are not otherwise disposed to apply “rich” or judge true applications thereof. Then we might propose the following biconditional: the truth conditions of an assertion of “Mary is rich” align with the standards prevailing in Didi’s conversation iff the assertion is true in, and only in, worlds where the person spoken of has a degree of wealth in the aforementioned range.³
- (ii) *Social normative*. The prevailing standards in a conversation are constituted by the participants’ allegiance to norms in the use of the relevant expressions. For example, suppose that there is some range of degrees of wealth such that participants in Didi’s

³This supposition about the nature of the dispositions of Didi and her peers is obviously unrealistic (and the same goes for the supposition about norms below), and linking truth conditions to dispositions thus simple-mindedly conceived runs into difficulties partially analogous to those that beset dispositionalist accounts of mental content in the philosophy of mind. I do not wish to push difficulties for economic contextualism in this area, however, so I will set this issue aside.

conversation accept norms that endorse (alternatively, permit) application of “rich” to people with those degrees of wealth, and that do not otherwise endorse (alternatively, permit) applications of “rich”. Then we might propose the following biconditional: the truth conditions of an assertion of “Mary is rich” align with the standards prevailing in Didi’s conversation iff the assertion is true in, and only in, worlds where the person spoken of has a degree of wealth in the aforementioned range. That conversational participants accept a given norm, meanwhile, might consist in such facts as that they approve of or reward utterances satisfying it (or at any rate, that they do not disapprove of or sanction utterances satisfying it).

- (iii) *Epistemological*. A prevailing standard of application is a criterion that conversational participants rely upon in deciding whether to apply, or judge true applications of, “rich” to given people.

I mention this third notion merely to distinguish it from the other two and then set it aside. The relevant point here is just that a prevailing standard governing people’s *use* of an expression needn’t itself be something that they *make use of*. It needn’t be an item upon which they base their utterances or which otherwise rationally guides their usage or judgments. A failure to see this distinction can make the idea of a prevailing conversational standard look more obscure or unlikely than it need be.

I will take it that talk of conversational standards, in the context of economic contextualism and like-minded doctrines, is to be interpreted in terms of (i), (ii), or both. It will not matter for the discussion to come which of these interpretations we opt for, and so I will not decide amongst them. One reason it will not matter is that the presence of given social norms is likely to yield the presence of correlative dispositions, for people tend to adhere to norms that obtain in their social contexts. Thus whether we interpret economic contextualism as explicitly tying truth conditions to dispositions or to social norms, the upshot will

be an alignment of truth conditions and dispositions. This in turn entails that applications of “rich” are likely to be true. Or better, an application of “rich” will be true so long as nothing prevents the utterer from applying the term as she is wont to do. This is the crucial feature of views that claim the alignment of truth conditions with prevailing conversational standards: they entail that a person applying the relevant term will speak truly so long as she applies the term in accord with her (and her conversational peers’) dispositions, inclinations, judgments, normative allegiances, etc. The precise details of this or that account of what it is for given conversational standards to prevail matter less for us than this general implication.⁴

§3. Provincialism and pragmatism

That different standards sometimes prevail in different conversations for the use of given predicative expressions is undeniable. As a matter of broad sociological fact, for example, Richard is surely correct that more stringent standards for the application of “rich” obtain in conversations of wealthy people like Naomi than non-wealthy people like Didi.

Now, Richard holds that “the truth of [Naomi’s and Didi’s] claims about wealth turns on whatever standards prevail within their conversations.” In the terms introduced here, the truth conditions of their claims about wealth align with prevailing conversational standards.

⁴It is worth forestalling a possible source of confusion at this juncture. One intramural debate amongst epistemological contextualists is whether to construe the parameter that shifts from context to context as an “epistemic standard” or as something else, such as a set of alternative answers to a question (Schaffer, 2005). In the context of this debate, the talk of standards is given a different connotation than it has here. On the present account, to say that Mary satisfies the prevailing conversational standard for “knowing” that the bank is open might be to say that her epistemic (and perhaps practical) position with respect to that proposition is in the range associated with conversational participants’ dispositions or norms, in the sense illustrated in (i) or (ii) above. It is a further question how to specify the relevant range. What features of a putative knower’s epistemic (and perhaps practical) position in context prompt conversational participants to apply or endorse applications of “know” to her? Talk of “epistemic standards” is sometimes associated with a particular family of answers to this question, which draw on the machinery of reliabilist epistemology. But other answers are possible, and any number of such alternatives can be consistent with the view that truth conditions vary with prevailing conversational standards, in our sense, for the application of “know”.

Given that, as we have granted, the standards vary between Naomi's and Didi's conversational contexts, it follows immediately that their respective assertions of a sentence of the form "S is rich" have different truth conditions, and can differ in truth value.

The idea that truth conditions align with conversational standards can of course be applied to assertions containing terms other than "rich". Here is a simple template, with "f" to be replaced by a predicative term or common noun:

Provincialism about "f"-assertions. The truth conditions of an assertion of a sentence of the form "S f's" (or "S is f" or "S is an f") align with the standards for the application of "f" prevailing within the conversation to which the assertion belongs.

Economic contextualism is provincialism about "rich"-assertions. And it is hardly the only form of provincialism to be found in the contextualist literature. Time and again contextualists endorse views that entail that truth conditions vary with conversational standards for the terms they are discussing. (So as not to overburden the exposition at this juncture, I will hold off on citing further examples until §5.)

But why accept such views? What justification might there be for taking the truth conditions of simple atomic assertions to align with the prevailing standards for the application of the predicative terms? One possible answer is that provincialism flows from a certain methodological directive for theorizing about language use: the directive to treat speakers' (and listener's) "intuitions" about the simple applications of terms as decisive for resolving questions of truth conditions. Assuming a person's "intuitions" about the use of a term line up with her dispositions in the use of it, provincialism becomes inevitable.

As we will discuss in §5.2, this methodological directive has currency in philosophy of language and linguistics, and in the contextualist literature in particular. But it does not provide much of an answer to our current question of why to accept provincialist views of truth conditions. It just gives the issue a methodological gloss. Our question reemerges

immediately: why abide by the methodological directive?

Let's return to Richard. Richard regards economic contextualism as closely connected to a further doctrine, one which, he says, is "beyond serious dispute". The second doctrine is that "the truth conditions of 'Mary is rich' vary across contexts, as vary the interests, focus, and so on of participants in a conversation" (2004, p. 219). Again we can formulate a more general template of which this claim is just one instance:

Pragmatism about "f"-assertions. The truth conditions of an assertion of a sentence of the form "S f's" (or "S is f" or "S is an f") depend upon the interests, focus and so on of the participants in the conversation to which the assertion belongs.

Richard takes provincialism about "rich"-assertions to be justified by pragmatism about "rich"-assertions. Indeed, he comes close to running the two together, as if the question of whether to accept the former was automatically answered by accepting the latter (See Richard, 2004, pp. 418–419). I take it that many contextualists, with varying degrees of explicitness, see provincialism, and the methodological directive to which it is intimately connected, as underwritten by pragmatism. The relationship between pragmatism and provincialism is my primary concern in this paper.

We will begin to examine this relationship very shortly. But let's focus for a moment on pragmatism itself. Why accept that the truth conditions of assertions depend upon the interests and focus of speaker and audience? Richard doesn't say, presumably because he takes the point to be "beyond serious dispute". And in fact, it is not difficult to feel its force. For pragmatism is tied to a deeply compelling idea about how content—or more generally, truth conditions—accrue to utterances. Charles Travis gives elegant voice to the idea 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)

The point of an utterance is (at least) the point it has for the speaker and her audience. It is a function of such things as the interests, focus, and expectations of the participants in the discourse. And so Travis's slogan leads directly to the conclusion that content depends upon participants' interests, focus, and the rest. We need only make explicit that the content at issue is speech-act content, shift to talk of dependence of truth conditions in order to make room for the COE approach, and we get pragmatism.

As I say, the idea Travis articulates seems compelling. And it ought to sound familiar. It has been a central tenet of the discipline of pragmatics since its inception that we must recognize at least *some* notion of meaning according to which meaning (or at least the truth conditions associated with meaningful items) is directly shaped by the aims and interests of discursive participants. Speech acts serve communicative and expressive purposes; that is their reason for being. Surely then we should be able to identify some sense, some dimension, in which their meaning or significance (or at least the associated truth-conditions) are shaped by those purposes, and by the related psychological factors—the interests, concerns, focuses, and expectations—that inform our production and uptake of these communicative and expressive acts.

At one time, the mainstream view was that by and large these discursive-cum-psychological

factors affect only contents or truth conditions associated with an utterance in virtue of what it *implies*, in the sense in which what one implies is what one gets across via Gricean implicature or related mechanisms. The truth conditions of what one does not merely imply but overtly *says*, on the other hand, were thought to be fixed by expression meaning in conjunction with semantically dictated contributions from context, and consequently to neither require nor tolerate input from speaker/audience psychology (except perhaps in the case of a few special phenomena like perceptual demonstratives). However, the last decade has seen growing acceptance that overt speech-act content—e.g., what we assert, claim or state—is similarly beholden to the interests, aims and so on of discursive participants. The old view has come to seem to many both theoretically unmotivated and belied by a large and growing fund of linguistic data. To accept pragmatism is to align oneself with this burgeoning consensus. We can call this widespread shift of view the *pragmatic turn*.⁵

Let us now circle back. I am granting that pragmatism is plausible. But its plausibility is in part a function of its great abstraction. And its abstraction prevents it from having any substantive implications about the truth conditions of any particular assertions. In order to get from pragmatism to provincialism about, say, “rich”-assertions, we need to

⁵For other more or less explicit articulations and endorsements of the pragmatic turn, see Neale (2005), Recanati (2004, Ch. 1), Bezuidenhout (2002) and Soames (2010, Ch. 7). (There are of course differences among these thinkers. For example, Travis himself marries to the view of speech-act truth conditions I call pragmatism a skeptical view about semantic content. His running together such seemingly disparate varieties of meaning as “how our words represent”, “calling something blue”, and “what I in fact said” reflects not intellectual sloppiness but his radical-contextualist conviction that there is no such thing as semantic truth-conditional content, in the sense of “semantic” introduced in §2.1. Radical contextualism so understood represents the widest possible application of the pragmatic conception of meaning, and so might seem the natural end point of the line of thought we have been tracing. But in fact its defense would need to rest on considerations additional to any that that this line of thought has brought into view. Insofar as the motivation for viewing truth conditions as shaped by participant psychological attitudes flows from reflection on the communicative and expressive purposes of speech acts, it seems *prima facie* reasonable to take any results thus gleaned as discoveries about the nature of, as Austin would put it, illocutionary acts. For all we have said here, there may be good reasons, and many putative such reasons have indeed been offered, for taking locutionary acts to march to the beat of a different, ‘conventionally-encoded’, drummer. This is why, as I indicated in §2.1, it makes sense for our purposes to conceive contextualist doctrines as theses about speech-act content. Our focus is on the conviction that these doctrines are consequences of the dependence of truth conditions on participant psychological attitudes, and the case for the latter dependence is stronger and more direct for speech-act content than it is for semantic content.)

make assumptions about the interests, focus and other relevant attitudes of participants in conversations in which people advance claims about who is, or is not, “rich”. We need to assume in particular that these attitudes are such as to license interpreting the truth conditions of these claims as aligned with the prevailing standards for application of “rich”. But why assume that?

As I noted, Richard has no explicit answer to this question. I suspect that he (and many other contextualists) take for granted a train of thought along the following lines. The standards we adhere to in applying a term flow from our interests, focus, and other attitudes. That, for example, Naomi and her confidants draw a distinction in a certain place in applying “rich” to people reflects what they find salient and what matters to them. And so if we grant the dependence of the truth conditions of their assertions on their interests and focus, we ought to take their own standards of use to indicate the boundaries of those conditions.

This train of thought might seem natural. But as stated, it is invalid. From the premise that the interests and focus of conversational participants help determine truth conditions coupled with the premise that interests and focus also determine conversational standards, it simply doesn’t follow that acknowledging a role for these attitudes in determining truth conditions requires taking the truth conditions to align with the prevailing standards. Perhaps the attitudes both determine certain conversational standards and dictate an interpretation of truth conditions as floating free of those standards.

Indeed, it is obvious that this possibility is at least sometimes actual. Suppose two graduate students in environmental science, Pria and Julia, are in the field in British Columbia as part of a team studying the effects on wolves of habitat fragmentation. They have gone off alone to an area where the only animals with large paws are wolves and wolverines. Wolves have four toes and wolverines five, so the pair have many conversations in which the governing standard for application of a “wolf print” is whether the print is over 4” and bears the

impressions of four toes. Unbeknownst to the students, the fifth toe of a wolverine is often not visible in its tracks. Hence the extension determined by the prevailing conversational standards for “wolf print” includes both wolf prints and some wolverine prints. On some occasion, Pria points to tracks left by a wolverine in which only four toes are visible and says, “That’s a wolf print.” If the truth conditions of the assertion Pria thereby puts forward align with the governing standards for the application of the predicative term, then the assertion is true. But surely the right thing to say is that the assertion is false.

Acknowledging this does not entail a retreat from pragmatism. To the contrary. Pria’s and Julia’s interests are such that they want and intend their utterances of “That’s a wolf print” to identify wolf prints. Their study is on wolves, not wolverines, and their work will be flawed if it is not based on accurate information about wolf activity. That is precisely why, given their belief that only wolves leave large prints with exactly four toes visible, they use the standards they do in applying “wolf print”. It is also precisely why, from the perspective of pragmatism, we should interpret the truth conditions of Pria’s claim as divergent from those standards, and instead as keyed to whether the print at issue is the print of a wolf. To suppose otherwise would be to lose sight of the significance, the point, that the claim has for Pria and Julia in virtue of the enterprise in which they are engaged.

This counterexample might seem rather limited in significance. Prevailing standards diverge from truth conditions in this case because the standards of the participants to the conversation are based on false beliefs about which environmental traces are evidence for satisfaction of the conditions. It is hard to see how a similar state of affairs might obtain with respect to the dispositions involving “rich” we posited in §2.3. Those dispositions were specified as keyed to degrees of wealth, and the relationship between a degree of wealth and the question of whether a person can be truly said to be “rich” is not merely evidential. One’s degree of wealth is surely in part constitutive of one’s status as rich (or as not). So there seems no room for a mistake about evidence to be responsible for these dispositions

diverging from truth conditions. Granting pragmatism, then, what about the interests or focus of Naomi and her peers (or Didi and her peers) could warrant an interpretation of the truth conditions of their assertions such that their standards of application are mistaken?

It is high time we exit the level of abstraction at which we have been operating and descend to the messy world of actual human motivation, cognition and speech.

§4. Why rich people apply “rich” as they do

4.1 *Wishful thinking*

Richard suggests that prevailing standards for “rich” 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 that there will be stringent standards at work in Naomi’s conversation because for Naomi and her social peers, “a million dollars is not really all that much” (Richard, 2004, p. 218).

These observations are extremely plausible. But what exactly is their explanation? Let us focus on 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 circularity or question-begging.) For ease of exposition, let’s call the demanding standards of application for “rich” that, by hypothesis, prevail in the conversations of well-off people *H-standards* (“H” standing for “high”). 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”?

I will discuss two possible explanations, and I will do so in some detail.

The first explanation begins with the thought 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).⁶ 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 social policies, most notably taxation policies, that make 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 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

⁶That 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).

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, Gress and Shapiro, 2005, chapter 7).⁷

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 reinforce a self-conception that Frank characterizes as that of a "simple middle-class" person. Now, if what a person asserts of herself, in saying, e.g., "I'm not rich", is true just so long as she is not a member of the 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's truth conditions 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

⁷Of 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 \$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).

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 the truth conditions of that utterance as keyed to the categories in view 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 lips as having the same conditions of correct application as it does in the context of public debate over tax policy. Otherwise we must treat these utterances as equivocations.⁸ Of course, our original case of an application of “rich” was a private conversation amongst wealthy people, and not in any direct way a contribution to public discourse. But it is perfectly intelligible to suppose that the dispositions (or norms) that govern even those uses are a consequence of the conversational participants’ desire to maintain a view of their own wealth that justifies their resentment of burdensome tax (and other social) policies. The natural candidate for such a view is one according to which people with their degree of wealth do not count as rich by the standards of public debate over tax policy.

To be quite explicit, I am 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”, pragmatism gives us excellent grounds to interpret the truth-conditions of those utterances 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 I have called *public discourse* about wealth, which encompasses, among other things, the widely

⁸Ordinarily we assume that an equivocation involves illicit reliance on a tacit shift in content. The possibility of COE contextualism brings with it the possibility of a different kind of equivocation: illicit reliance on a tacit shift in circumstance of evaluation.

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. But in that discourse the conditions for its truthful application do not correspond to H-standards.⁹ And so if a well-off person’s utterance of a sentence of the form, “S is rich” or “S is not rich” should be interpreted as having the same truth-conditions that other utterances of sentences of those forms, made in public-discursive contexts, possess, it follows that these utterances are counterexamples to economic contextualism.

Again, none of this is to deny that well-off people *apply* “rich” in accord with H-standards; 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. 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, makes assertions whose truth conditions are fixed independently of these standards, and, in fact, do not match up with them.

Might it suffice for serving these posited interests that it merely *appear* to participants in public discourse, insofar as the relevant claims of the well-off person are brought to their attention, that the well-off person has represented herself as not wealthy by the standards of public discourse? This question bespeaks a misunderstanding of the current proposal. The proposal is that the prevailing standards for “rich” amongst conversations of the wealthy

⁹That is an assumption necessary for the argument for economic contextualism: to get the appropriate contrasting cases, the contextualist needs the H-standards to be special to the conversations of the well-off. But the contextualist’s assumption 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 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.

are shaped by the desire of these conversational participants *to be middle-class, and hence not rich, by the standards of public discourse*, a desire they possess for various intelligible reasons. Their “rich” assertions are designed to portray the world as if this desire were true, and thus to reinforce and maintain the sought-after self-conception. These assertions cannot serve that function unless, when a wealthy person claims of herself (or of someone with a similar degree of wealth) that she is not “rich”, the truth conditions of her claim align with the standards of public discourse.

This treatment might seem objectionable on a different ground: that it would portray well-off people as strangely confused in their use of “rich”. In the case of Pria and Julia, we could trace their reliance on incorrect standards to a mistaken belief about evidence, and one might worry about the current case: what comparable factual mistake is here being claimed to explain the well-off person’s adherence to incorrect standards of application for “rich”? That the right answer may be “no factual mistake” does not impugn the proposed treatment. 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 (Elster, 1983, pp. 151ff). The hypothesis is that a well-off person is motivated to believe that, by the standards of public discourse, she is not rich. (Or, if a meta-linguistic formulation is preferred, the person is motivated to believe that it would be false to say of her, in the context of public discourse, that she is “rich”.) This in turn gives rise to dispositions to make assertions about who is “rich” and who is “not rich”, with truth conditions beholden to the standards of public discourse, that claim people at her degree of wealth to belong to the “not rich” category. That we have not identified an evidential error at the root of these assertions is part of the point: wishful thinking may give rise to factual mistakes, but those mistakes have their source not in other factual mistakes, but in psychological processes in which one’s beliefs are

not appropriately sensitive to evidential considerations as such.¹⁰

4.2 Bias and frames of reference

Let me turn now to the second explanation about 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, 2007*a*, 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, 2007*b*). 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

¹⁰Two 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 basic proposal of this section could also easily be made to square with a more nuanced model of "hot cognition" than Elster-style wishful thinking, such as one in which desires bias the selection of evidence from memory. See Kunda (1990, 1999).

a less rarified precinct is much less likely to regularly encounter individuals who have not merely more money than she does, but vastly, astronomically, more money.

Suppose, picking up on these observations, we conclude that the application of “rich” by non-super-rich but still well-off people is affected by the presence, and high salience, of super-rich people in their social context. In particular, suppose we conclude that at least part of the explanation of why the non-super-rich well-off apply “rich” in accord with standards that exclude themselves from its extension is that they notice, and dwell on, the fact that they have vastly less money than these salient others. Anyone with even a passing familiarity with social psychology will see the explanation that suggests itself here. The explanation is that the peculiar social context of (to use Franks’ term) Lower Richistanis *biases* their judgments about who is rich and who is not. On this proposal, the effect of the social context of Lower Richistanis is to produce a tendency to err in a certain direction when making judgments about who is (as I can put it in this context) rich.

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.¹¹ 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*.

The frame of reference principle. A person’s self-appraisals along any number of dimensions are heavily shaped by comparative judgments to salient others, and the class of others treated as salient tends to be drawn from the person’s immediate social context.

Of particular relevance to the present discussion, sociologists have pointed to findings

¹¹Early 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).

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).

Suppose we posit that the well-off's adherence to H-standards is a symptom of the mechanism shaping self-conceptions at stake in the *frame of reference principle*. If we accept this explanation, should we be economic contextualists? Should we hold that different frames of reference have the effect not merely of shifting speakers' and audiences' standards for application of the terms of appraisal, but of thereby shifting the content, or at least truth conditions, of utterances of the terms of appraisal?

It's worth noting, to begin, 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.¹² (Nor, of course, do they consider the more technically sophisticated proposal that the different applications have a shifting standard as a parameter in their circumstances of evaluation.) Rather, they take the opposing applications to correspond to no difference other than *conflicting beliefs* (modulo the person being appraised) concerning univocal categories of appraisal.

Why? I take there to be two broad reasons for this assumption. First, the frame of reference effects that psychologists and sociologists have documented often concern patterns of linguistic responses that do not seem even *prima facie* candidates for contextualist interpretation. Suppose a student confronted with positive cues relevant to self-appraisal says, “I’m proud”, and a student confronted with negative cues relevant to self-appraisal says, “I’m not proud”. What motivation could there be for taking this difference to correspond to a difference in the conditions for truthful application of “proud”? Not because we need to do so in order to hold that both utterances might be true. No doubt both utterances *are* true, but the natural thought here is that this difference owes to nothing more or less than the fact that the first student felt proud and the second one didn’t. That is, there was a relevant difference in how things stood with the students, and their utterances report on this. Positing a difference in truth conditions as well looks at best wildly extraneous. (Compare: a person says, “I’m happy,” her boss tells he she’s fired, and she then says, “I’m not happy”. The role of the firing was surely to change the state of mind being reported on. What is there then to be said for holding that it also shifted the content or some standard-of-happiness parameter in the circumstance of evaluation?)

Second, 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 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

¹²These examples are respectively from Smith (2000), Morse and Gergen (1970), and Crosby (1982).

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.¹³ Since experimental data indicate that there is likely a range of attitudinal and affective differences between, e.g., the employee who says she's "adequately compensated" and the one who, confronted with a different frame of reference, says she 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.

Recall Frank's observation. He says that people worth between \$5 and \$10 million "don't *feel* wealthy"—he could equally have said they "don't feel rich". And the Times reporter says that their proximity to astronomical wealth makes well-off New Yorkers "feel poor". The suggestion is that their self-denials of wealth are accompanied by a constellation of affective and conative attitudes, attitudes that would not be present if they did deem themselves "wealthy". That is just what the social scientists find again and again: differing self-ascriptions bespeak meaningful affective and conative differences across a range of modalities. These differences strongly suggest the presence of a cognitive difference as well, a difference in belief.

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 that they aren't rich because their judgments about wealth are biased by the

¹³See Walker and Smith (2002a) for a survey of this disputed terrain.

high salience of 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, in the non-H-standards context of this paper, can characterize without misrepresentation as beliefs about who is rich and who is not rich. Less obliquely, the suggestion is simply that what Naomi’s and Didi’s differing remarks about Mary reveal is not that Naomi’s “rich”-remark traffics in a different content than does Didi’s, but rather that, in virtue of frame-of-reference effects, she is led to take an opposing belief toward the very same content. The justification for ascribing this latter belief to Naomi would be, first, the presence of the further affective and cognitive attitudes hinted at by Frank, and second, the fact that the bias-inducing mechanism we are hypothesizing to be at work in Naomi shows up again and again in human cognition, in particular in many cases where the presence of the structurally analogous beliefs is beyond question.

Of course, even if we grant the presence of these attitudes and mechanisms, they do not logically rule out an interpretation of Naomi’s remarks that accords with economic contextualism. That the effect of a given cognitive mechanism is not in general to produce utterances whose contents are pegged to special local standards of use does not mean it never has such an effect. And the presence of the further affective and cognitive attitudes is not decisive either. An economic contextualist can happily allow that there are similarities between the content Didi (or I, in this paper) express with “rich” and the different content Naomi expresses with “rich”. Might not the presence of these similarities be enough to make sense of the thought that Naomi doesn’t ‘feel wealthy’—that, for example, if she says, “I’m not rich”, she expresses a belief intimately tied to feelings of anxiety and inferiority, or to an obsessive focus on means for future wealth-accumulation?

These are fair points in themselves. But their dialectical force in this context is nil: they serve only to illustrate that our question is empirical, one of human psychology and interpretation, and so that arriving at an answer will be a matter of finding the most plausible

option rather than of proving one correct. Granted, like psychological mechanisms needn't always produce like effects. But given a choice between supposing that they do or supposing that they don't, we should choose the former unless we have some specific reason to think otherwise. Granted, the fact that two beliefs yield the same behavioral and affective consequences doesn't guarantee they have the same content. But behavioral and affective consequences are one of our primary bases for individuating attitudes, and given a choice between supposing that sameness of consequences bespeaks sameness of belief or supposing it doesn't, we should choose the former unless we have some specific reason to think otherwise.

A similar rejoinder can be made to an objection that a COE contextualist might think to register at this juncture. In the immediately preceding, we have been talking about the contents of the beliefs expressed by given remarks about wealth, rather than about the truth-conditions of these remarks and beliefs. COE economic contextualism claims only that truth conditions shift with conversational standards. It is thus of a piece with that view to hold that when, say, Naomi sincerely says "I'm not rich", she expresses a belief whose content is precisely the negation (bracketing the prospect of special *de se* content on the subject side) of the belief I express when I sincerely say, in a contribution to public discourse about wealth, "Naomi is rich". And that she has a belief with this content presumably suffices to explain why she does not 'feel wealthy'.

We should acknowledge that it is logically consistent with the frame-of-reference explanation of Naomi's conformity to H-standards that her utterances about wealth are to be evaluated at a circumstance that includes those standards as a parameter. But the question, as before, is what reason there is to suppose this to be so. Frame-of-reference effects offer a plausible explanation of why Naomi should have a belief about her own wealth whose content is the negation of my belief about her wealth, and in so doing they offer a plausible explanation of why her remarks conform to H-standards for the application of "rich". Do frame-of-reference effects also explain why her "rich"-remarks are to be evaluated at a dif-

ferent COE than mine? If so, how do they do so? Or on the other hand, might there be further features of Naomi's attitudes and interests that justify the divergence in COE? If so, what are these features, and why should we believe them to be present if we already have an adequate explanation of why Naomi conforms to H-standards? These are just the sort of questions I have been insisting that contextualists need to answer. What matters is not what is logically possible but what we have good empirical reasons to believe.

Before moving on, it will be illuminating to place the considerations we have been discussing in this subsection in a broader empirical framework. One of the most robust findings of 20th century psychology is that a person's classification of stimuli is strongly influenced by the presence of contrasting stimuli. The core phenomenon is that a stimulus will typically be placed much higher on a scale for measuring a given gradable property when in a context of stimuli that score low on this scale than when placed in a context of stimuli that score highly. For example, a line will be judged to have a greater value on a scale for ranking or measuring lengths when placed in a context of shorter lines than when placed in a context of longer lines. This and other "contrast effects" have been discussed by psychologists at least since the 1920's.

It may be of interest to contemporary contextualists to know that psychologists in at least some branches of this study were well ahead of the curve in raising the question of whether to interpret the responses generated by their experiments as having context-sensitive truth conditions. And so, for example, Manis (1967) considers the view, discussed in Volkman (1951) 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. 326). Manis, and others, concluded that the contextualist interpretation (as we would now call it) cannot be correct as a general account of the contrastive effect. One reason was that the effect can be shown to persist even when the participants are required to couch their

estimates in “extraexperimentally”, “absolute” and “relatively unambiguous” terms such as “inches” (Manis, 1967, p. 328; see also Campbell, Lewis and Hunt, 1958). Of course, contemporary contextualists do not hesitate to ascribe context-sensitivity to terms that Manis and Campbell would likely regard as “extraexperimental”, “absolute” and “relatively unambiguous”. But their point looks well-taken. No one, not even the subject of the experiment herself, is likely to find it plausible that when the subject classified a 12-inch line as “six inches”, her classification, properly interpreted, was correct. Indeed, pragmatism speaks against this interpretation. The interests of a sincere experimental subject directed by the experimenter to provide as accurate a measurement in “inches” as she can of given lines are surely such as to support the interpretation that the estimate she advances when she writes or says “six inches” is that the line in question is six inches as measured by, say, a ruler.

More recently, with the rise to dominance of cognitive psychology, there have been attempts in the psychological literature to understand, or at least to describe, all the varied manifestations of the contrastive effect in terms of a small set of general cognitive principles and mechanisms. To take one example that gives a flavor of the literature, 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”. The basic idea of this “theory of judgment”, as they call it, 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.

Wedell and Parducci consider, and reject, a contextualist interpretation of the contrasting cases predicted by their theory:

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).

The central points here correspond to the reasons we gave for an anti-provincialist interpretation of the cases documented by the social psychological and sociological literature. The effects of contrastive contexts are not limited to the character of linguistic responses (“overt ratings” of stimuli). When the effects are not linguistic, they are obviously not subject to a provincialist treatment: the physiological components of anxiety, for example, have no truth conditions to be interpreted one way or another. And even when linguistic responses are in play, the contrasting responses are associated with further psychological and behavioral differences. These differences support the hypothesis that the contrasting responses record conflicting “psychological impressions”—e.g., conflicting beliefs—rather than being “artifact[s] of how responses are generated and communicated.”

4.3 Same old, same old

In closing our examination of the well-springs of the utterances of the wealthy on the topic of wealth, it is worth noting that despite the occasional appeals here to somewhat newfangled psychological theory, the hypotheses I have been discussing are not novel. We find both, and more, intimated by a seasoned observer of Richistan during its first golden age, as he endeavors to address the question “Are the rich happy?”:

Let me admit at the outset that I write this essay without adequate material. I have never known, I have never seen, any rich people. Very often I have thought that I had found them. But it turned out that it was not so. They were not rich at all. They were quite poor. They were hard up. They were pushed for money. They didn’t know where to turn for ten thousand dollars.

In all the cases that I have examined this same error has crept in. I had often imagined, from the fact of people keeping fifteen servants, that they were rich. I had supposed that because a woman rode down town in a limousine to buy a fifty-dollar hat, she must be well to do. Not at all. All these people turn out on examination to be not rich. They are cramped. They say it themselves. Pinched, I think, is the word they use. When I see a glittering group of eight people in a stage box at the opera, I know that they are all pinched. The fact that they ride home in a limousine has nothing to do with it.

A friend of mine who has ten thousand dollars a year told me the other day with a sigh that he found it quite impossible to keep up with the rich. On his income he couldn’t do it. A family that I know who have twenty thousand a year have told me the same thing. They can’t keep up with the rich. There is no use trying. A man that I respect very much who has an income of fifty thousand dollars a year from his law practice has told me with the greatest frankness that

he finds it absolutely impossible to keep up with the rich. He says it is better to face the brutal fact of being poor. He says he can only give me a plain meal, what he calls a home dinner –it takes three men and two women to serve it—and he begs me to put up with it.

As far as I remember, I have never met Mr. Carnegie. But I know that if I did he would tell me that he found it quite impossible to keep up with Mr. Rockefeller. No doubt Mr. Rockefeller has the same feeling.¹⁴

§5. Morals

5.1 Contextualist doctrines and error theories of conversational standards

Contextualists notice that different standards for the application of given terms prevail in different conversations. They maintain that truth conditions vary accordingly.

This structural claim—displayed in full abstraction by the template for provincialism about “f”-assertions given in §3—is ubiquitous, though its presence can be more or less explicit. On one end of the spectrum, Raffman (2005, p. 247) characterizes her “contextualism about vagueness” as the view that the truth value of a sentence like “That is a heap” changes when “the speaker undergoes a change in her verbal dispositions,” such as occurs when “she will now be disposed to judge as borderline some of the piles that she previously judged as heaps.” Or, with a bit more technical apparatus: “For any object O, vague predicate ‘P’ applies to O, relative to TC [i.e., the ‘total context’], just in case a competent speaker could judge O in TC and, were he to judge it in TC, he would apply ‘P’ to it” (Raffman, 1996, p. 186). Here what is called “contextualism” is a view that explicitly states that the truth conditions for the relevant class of utterances are determined by the kinds of disposition we have associated with the idea of prevailing conversational standards.

¹⁴Collected in Leacock (1981, pp. 110–111); originally published in 1917. Thanks to Elisabeth Camp for the reference.

Epistemological-contextualist doctrines, by contrast, are not typically formulated in terms of talk of conversational participants' dispositions (or norms). Rather, they speak of such things as whether doubts have been introduced into the conversation, or of what is practically at stake for the parties to the conversation. But the *aim* of these doctrines is to conform to provincialism about "know"-assertions. Epistemological contextualists seek to specify parameters that will capture conversational participants' own standards of application of "know". Their different views are in effect different hypotheses about the character of, and dimensions of variability possible in, these standards of application.

Thus DeRose, in defending his view that truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions depend upon an "epistemic standard" parameter, writes:

'Know(s)' is context-sensitive in at least roughly the way contextualists claim it is ... largely because speakers in some contexts do (in fact, with propriety, and with apparent truth) seriously describe 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 will, in other contexts, 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, 2009, p. 67)

DeRose's claim is that we should hold that truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions vary with an epistemic-standard parameter because contextual variations in this parameter correspond to our actual standards of application for "know". The underlying assumption is that truth conditions track dispositions and accepted proprieties for application of the relevant term or terms on the part of speakers and audiences. We are asked to accept that "'know(s)' is context-sensitive in at least roughly the way contextualists claim it is" precisely because

that is what it takes to respect this assumption.

For a final example, Brogaard (2007, p. 1) characterizes “moral contextualism” as the view that “ordinary moral expressions like ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ depend for their correct application on the moral standards of the speaker (or some contextually salient group of which the speaker is a member).” (Brogaard does not pursue the possibility mentioned in her parenthesis, focusing on the role of a speaker’s standards.) She never tells us what a person’s having certain moral standards involves or consists in. This is typical of the current stage of the contextualist literature: the focus is on abstract questions about parameters posited to account for context sensitivity—e.g., whether to see the parameters as contributed by context of use or context of assessment, whether to place the parameter in the content-determining context or in the circumstance of evaluation—and not on the nature of the features of the real-world context that fix the parameters. But it is evident from her discussion that a speakers’ moral standards are supposed to determine, or at any rate coincide with, her judgments about the truth or falsity of moral claims. Thus when Mary considers a claim that “Female infibulation is wrong”, and asserts that this claim is mistaken, her assertion will be “true iff Mary’s considered view about female infibulation is that it is not wrong” (2007, p. 17). This is provincialism. It should not take much reflection for readers familiar with the literature to convince themselves that the same assumption is almost always in the background of contextualist discussions that rely upon unexamined talk of speakers’ or audiences’ standards.

Why believe views that explicitly endorse, or seek to respect, provincialism about given areas of discourse? As I discussed in §3, contextualism is often portrayed by its proponents in philosophy as emerging from a pragmatic orientation in reflection about meaning. At one time, the mainstream view was that the role of the communicative context in shaping the significance of an utterance was restricted to forms of significance and meaning located outside the boundaries of overt speech-act content. But further reflection and data have

made it increasingly difficult to maintain this position. We should give it up, and accept that the attitudes that control our production and reception of communicative and expressive acts can influence the truth conditions of what we say or assert. It follows that these truth conditions will vary as these attitudes vary, and so in particular are susceptible of variations across cases where the expressions used to frame the utterances at issue remain constant.

We ceded this line of thought to contextualists in §3. But as I noted there, a step remains: we must get from the conclusion of the line of thought to the kinds of doctrines I cited above, doctrines that say, or purport to entail, that truth conditions vary with prevailing conversational standards. To justify that step in any given case we must introduce and defend a hypothesis about what the relevant attitudes of conversational participants actually are. This hypothesis should explain why the participants adhere to the standards they do, and in so doing explain why, given pragmatism, the truth conditions of their claims should be interpreted as aligning with those standards. So far, contextualists have not had much to say on this score.

Here we have explored a variety of kinds of hypothesis about why a given local discourse might be governed by distinctive standards in the application of a predicative term. They sort into three broad categories. Let G be the set of participants in the discourse at issue, and F the relevant predicative term. Then the categories are the following.

Error theories of prevailing conversational standards. The standards for application of F prevailing within conversations among members of G are shaped by:

- (i) *Evidential misinformation.* Members of G are *misinformed* about what counts as good *evidence* for (or against) the truth of their F -assertions.
- (ii) *Motivated cognition.* One or another species of *motivated cognition* (such as wishful thinking) influences G -members' dispositions and normative attitudes with respect to the advancement and acceptance of F -assertions.

(iii) *Frame-of-reference effects*. Via one or another *frame-of-reference effect* (such as a contrast effect), features of G-members' social milieu or other circumstances influence G-members' dispositions and normative attitudes with respect to the advancement and acceptance of *F*-assertions.

Pria's and Julia's application of "wolf print" illustrates the first of these possibilities, and I have argued that there is excellent reason to think that the use of "rich" by rich people exhibit the other two.

These categories of explanation are not mutually exclusive: processes of motivated cognition, for example, might lead one to become misinformed about evidence. Nor are they exhaustive of possible error-theoretic explanations. (iii) can be generalized: I focused on frame-of-reference effects, by definition restricted to effects on self-appraisals, because it is well-established that judgments about wealth are thus mediated. But as we noted, contrast effects and other cognitive biases apply much more widely. And I have not considered whole ranges of other possible error-theoretic explanations, such as those that would trace the prevalence of given standards to social forces like conformity or peer-group identity.

The explanations I have discussed are appropriately labeled *error theories* of conversational standards because, as we have seen, they support interpretations of the assertions at issue such that the truth conditions of these assertions diverge from the prevailing conversational standards for application of the predicative terms. Granting these interpretations, the prevailing conversational standards are in error.

If conversational standards diverge from truth conditions for given utterances, then, of course, views that claim these truth conditions to depend upon and align with conversational standards are wrong. As we have seen, contextualists characteristically maintain such views. Thus an adequate case for such views should give us reason to think that an error theory does not provide the right explanation of the standards at work in the local discourses to which these utterances belong. If contextualists are to be in a position to offer such a case,

they must first acknowledge that a question arises here at all.

5.2 Contextualist appeals to ordinary language (*a.k.a., intuitions*)

Contextualist doctrines are often taken to receive strong support from ‘ordinary language’. Here again is DeRose on epistemological contextualism:

The best grounds for accepting contextualism come from how knowledge-attribution (and knowledge-denying) sentences are used in ordinary, non-philosophical talk: What ordinary speakers will count as ‘knowledge’ in some non-philosophical contexts they will deny is such in others. ... This type of basis in ordinary language not only provides the best grounds we have for accepting contextualism concerning knowledge attributions, but, I believe, is evidence of the very best type one can have for concluding that *any* piece of ordinary language has context-sensitive truth-conditions. (DeRose, 2009, pp. 47–48)

We might also speak, and contextualists do, of ordinary speakers’ ‘intuitions’ about the truth of, say, knowledge attributions. Since the ‘intuitions’ of a sincere ordinary speaker about the truth values of assertions can presumably be expected to line up with her actual dispositions with respect to the production and assessment of these assertions, these seem two ways of describing the same fund of data.

Lately, increasing critical attention has been paid to the status and legitimacy of appeals to speakers’ first-order intuitions about use as justification for claims about meaning and truth conditions (see, e.g., Devitt, 2008; Hansen, 2010). This is a salutary trend. The contribution I want to make to this topic is very limited. It is simply the observation that claims about ‘ordinary language’ and ‘intuitions’ do not in themselves give us any reason to favor provincialist accounts of truth conditions as opposed to error theories of conversational standards. As is clear from the quote above (along with the quote in §5.1), observations

about ‘ordinary language’, for DeRose, are simply observations about what we are calling prevailing conversational standards. The methodology DeRose here indicates amounts to this: note the prevailing conversational standards for given assertions, and then conclude that the truth conditions of the assertions are given by those standards.

This approach will yield correct results only if the truth conditions of these assertions do in fact align with the prevailing conversational standards, and so only if error theories of those standards would be wrong. But that is not something the prevailing conversational standards can themselves tell us. It is thus not something that can be concluded, or indeed that receives any support at all, from what DeRose tells us are the “best grounds for accepting contextualism”.

5.3 Contextualism, invariantism, provincialism and cosmopolitanism

Both proponents and opponents of the contextualist doctrines we have been discussing—epistemological contextualism, moral contextualism, contextualism about vague terms, economic contextualism and so on—tend to represent the relevant debates as over a choice between these doctrines and *invariantism*, where an invariantist view of a given class of utterance holds that the truth conditions of utterances in the class (at least the aspects of the truth conditions associated with the predicative terms at issue) remain invariant across contexts. This framing is highly misleading. It obscures the issues that bear on proper evaluation of the contextualist doctrines.

Let us think of invariantism (and the other doctrines we will discuss in this section) as always to be keyed to particular predicative expressions. Here is a simple template, with “f” to be replaced with some predicative term and “S” a placeholder for noun phrases:

Invariantism about “f”-assertions. The truth conditions of assertions of a sentence of the form “S f’s” (or “S is f” or “S is an f”) do not vary across contexts of assertion (except in

ways, such as they may be, owing to the presence of the expression substituting for “S”).

Suppose, as might seem natural, we define “contextualism” in opposition to invariantism. That yields:

Contextualism about “f”-assertions. The truth conditions of assertions of a sentence of the form “S f’s” (or “S is f” or “S is an f”) vary across contexts of assertion (and not just in ways, such as they may be, that owe to the presence of the expression substituting for “S”).

If we adhered to this definition, “moral contextualism” would name the view that the truth conditions of assertions of sentences with forms like “S is [not] wrong” vary across contexts of assertion, “epistemological contextualism” the view that the truth conditions of assertions of sentences with the form “S does [not] know that p” vary across contexts of assertion, and so on. However, as we have seen, the views actually advanced and defended in the literature under these and similar labels are more specific: they claim, or seek to guarantee, that the truth conditions of their respective classes of assertions vary across context of utterances *in accord with prevailing conversational standards* for the relevant predicative terms.

Such views suggest a further opposition, and we already have a term for one half of it:

Provincialism about “f”-assertions. The truth conditions of an assertion of a sentence of the form “S f’s” (or “S is f” or “S is an f”) align with the standards for the application of “f” prevailing within the conversation to which the assertion belongs.

Provincialism’s opposite number can be formulated thusly:

Cosmopolitanism about “f”-assertions. The truth conditions of an assertion of a sentence of the form “S f’s” (or “S is f” or “S is an f”) do not align with the standards for the application of “f” prevailing within the conversation to which the assertion belongs.

Contextualism about “f”-assertions follows from provincialism about “f”-assertions. Or more accurately, it follows from provincialism about “f”-assertions coupled with:

“f”-standard variation. The prevailing standards for application of “f” vary across different conversations.

I have shown that “contextualism”, as deployed in the contextualist literature, is often used as a label for provincialism about this or that predicative term. These doctrines (when paired with the relevant, and often extremely plausible, assumption of standard variation) imply contextualism, in the sense defined above, about their respective classes of assertion. But they do so by endorsing a *particular kind* of contextual variation. This means that one can be a contextualist about “rich”-assertions (in our sense) while rejecting the ‘contextualism’ of Richard, i.e., provincialism about “rich”-assertions. Taking the contrapositive, one could embrace cosmopolitanism about “rich”-assertions while denying invariantism about “rich”-assertions. I have argued that there are good reasons to doubt that ‘economic contextualism’ gives the right truth conditions for assertions by wealthy people about who is, and who isn’t, “rich”. But even if the arguments I have given are sound, they do not directly support economic invariantism.

The point is a structural one about error theories of conversational standards. Error theories belie the identification of conditions of truthful application with prevailing conversational standards of application. They are thus inconsistent with provincialism about the assertions at issue. But they well may leave open that a non-invariantist cosmopolitanism, and hence contextualism in the sense just introduced, might still be correct. Consider the suggestion, advanced in §4.1, that wealthy Americans conform to H-standards for application of “rich” because doing so serves to express and reinforce their conception of themselves as middle class by the standards operative in American public discourse about wealth. I argued that this hypothesis conduces, as I can now put it, to a cosmopolitanist interpretation of

the truth conditions of their “rich”-assertions. Taking this line of thought just a bit further yields the positive suggestion that the truth conditions of their “rich”-assertions align with the standards for the application of “rich” that prevail in American public discourse about wealth. That suggestion yields economic invariantism only if the truth conditions of *all* possible “rich”-utterances align with those standards. And perhaps that is not so; perhaps, to take an example from Wedgwood (2008), different truth conditions attach to “rich”-assertions uttered in the context of an impoverished village in Zimbabwe.

Room opens for a non-invariantist cosmopolitanism about wealth discourse, and by extension about other areas of discourse as well. I cannot pursue this prospect here. But I believe that it is in this territory, rendered largely invisible by the invariantism/‘contextualism’ framework of the literature, that some of the most plausible views of the truth conditions of many classes of assertion lie.

5.4 The centrality of provincialism to ‘contextualist’ doctrine

That error-theoretic arguments challenge provincialism, and not necessarily contextualism (in our sense) as such, might seem a dialectical weakness on their part. We’ve seen that contextualists very often commit themselves to provincialism. But perhaps this is needless overreaching. Don’t the really interesting theoretical questions concern the above contrast between contextualism and invariantism?

What we find interesting will, of course, depend upon our interests. But at the least the following can be said: while the terminology and programmatic remarks of contextualists can appear to suggest that the crucial dispute for them is between contextualism and invariantism, provincialism is in fact essential to both 1) the justifications contextualists typically offer for their doctrines and 2) some of the primary philosophical consequences they purport to draw from them.

We have already seen that this is so with respect to 1). As we noted in §5.2, contextualists

typically argue for given dimensions of contextual variation in truth conditions by pointing to parallel variations in conversational standards. The inference from the latter to the former depends upon provincialism. Insofar as we reject provincialism in a given case—say, because we accept an error theory about the relevant conversational standards—the appeal to variation in conversational standards gives us no evident reason to accept the claim of truth-conditional variation. So while it is possible to accept contextualism while rejecting provincialism, and we have noted one model of what such a view might look like, arguments for this package of positions will not look much like the arguments actual contextualists currently offer for contextualism.

Now with respect to 2): provincialism is essential for the philosophical work to which many contextualists aim to put their views. One of the main sources of interest in contextualist doctrines among philosophers is their alleged capacity to solve various longstanding philosophical problems. In many cases, the proposed contextualist solutions to these problems depend upon provincialism.

Consider the standard contextualist treatment of epistemological skepticism, which has probably attracted more attention than any other single topic in the contextualist literature. The basic thread of the treatment is well-captured by DeRose:

Once we see that we don't know according to the standards the skeptic's maneuver have at least some tendency to put in place, but that we do know according to the ordinary standards that govern most of our thinking and speaking about what is and is not "known," so that the skeptic's "success" has no tendency to show that we're usually deeply mistaken in our ordinary thought about what we do or do not "know," we have seen most of what's important in the contextualist approach. (DeRose, 2004, p. 9).

Let's grant outright that "we don't know according to the standards the skeptic's maneuver

...puts in place” but that “we do now according to the ordinary standards that govern most of our thinking and speaking” in the following sense: we are disposed to deny and reject knowledge claims in the context of consideration of skeptical doubts and arguments, but disposed to assert and accept (at least many) comparable knowledge claims in everyday life. That observation in itself is of course no rebuke to skepticism; it will be amenable to anyone who grants that skeptical arguments can seem persuasive but yield conclusions that are ‘counter-intuitive’, which is to say, most people, including skeptics themselves. If we are to get to the conclusion that skeptical reflection, despite its “success”, “has no tendency to show that we’re usually deeply mistaken in our ordinary thought about what we do or do not ‘know’”, it must be true that we ‘don’t know according to skeptical standards’ but ‘do know according to ordinary standards’ in a further sense: namely, such that attributions of knowledge in the skeptical context are false while attributions of knowledge in ordinary contexts are often true. But how do we get that further result? The epistemological contextualist’s answer is that it is a consequence of the original observation. It is precisely because a positive claim to “know” in an ordinary context would often accord with our conversational standards in those contexts that such a claim would often be true, and it is precisely because an assertion of the very same sentence, about the very same subject and putative piece of knowledge, would not accord with the conversational standards prevailing in skeptical contexts that such assertions in such contexts would be false. The provincialist alignment of truth conditions with prevailing conversational standards is essential for this argument.

For a less familiar example, consider the solution to the sorites paradox that has been promoted by proponents of “contextualism about vagueness”. Imagine an argument with 10,000 premises: “1 grain of sand does not make a heap”, and then “If 1 grain of sand does not make a heap, then 2 grains of sand do not make a heap”, “If 2 grains of sand do not make a heap, then 3 grains of sand do not make a heap”, and so on up to “If 9,999 grains of sand do not make a heap, then 10,000 grains of sand do not make a heap”. The conclusion is

“10,000 grains of sand do not make a heap.” The paradox is that it looks as if the premises are true, the inference from the premises to the conclusion valid, and the conclusion false.

One straightforward way to respond to the sorites paradox (just presented in its ‘forced-march’ formulation) is to deny that all the premises are true, in particular, to hold that at least one of the conditional premises—no doubt located somewhere in the middle of the sequence—is not true. But this move would seem to entail that there is some n such that it is true to say that n grains of sand make a “heap” but not true to say that $n + 1$ grains of sand make a “heap”, and the problem is that there is no n with respect to which that seems to us to be correct. Part of what is involved in our regarding a term as vague, after all, is that we do not discern sharp boundaries in its application. Contextualists about vagueness (as represented by Raffman 1994, 1996; Shapiro 2006, and in crucial respects by Fara 2000) attempt to solve this problem. These contextualists hold that the extension of a vague term as uttered by a competent speaker is fixed by the speaker’s dispositions, and that the relevant dispositions on the part of the speaker change as she shifts her attention from one case to another. Exactly how they are supposed to shift, and exactly what effect these shifts are supposed to have on the extension, are questions too complex for us to address adequately here (and there are differences of detail among different contextualists). But the basic idea is that when a competent speaker attends to a particular number of grains of sand n and then registers a judgment about whether n grains of sand make a “heap”, she thereby creates a context whose effect on truth conditions is: 1) to ratify the speaker’s specific judgment, 2) to create a penumbra within which marginally different cases receive the same verdict, and 3) to generate a number n' , at some distance from n , at which point the verdict shifts. This ensures that at least one of the conditional premises will not be true. And it explains why we nonetheless never notice any sharp boundary: should the speaker turn her attention to cases in the vicinity of n' , she thereby changes the relevant context, and the boundary shifts elsewhere.

I do not wish to discuss the merits of this solution as such. The pertinent point for us is only that it crucially involves provincialism. The mere claim that statements couched in vague terms have context-dependent truth conditions offers no explanation of our inability to discern the boundaries that the contextualists insists are there. What is needed for the solution to work is that truth conditions be controlled by the mechanism just described, and this mechanism requires that the speaker's (shifting) dispositions of application be determinative of truth conditions.¹⁵ As Shapiro (2006, pp. 38–40) formulates the provincialist kernel of the solution: whether a given item falls into the extension of a vague term *P* on some occasion for the use of *P* is “determined” by whether “competent speakers would judge it” to so fall.

I will not take up more space here with further examples of the uses to which contextualists put provincialism. Let us instead take a step back. It is common knowledge that ‘contextualist’ accounts of this or that neighborhood of our collective discourse claim dependence of truth conditions on context of use. Less frequently remarked upon, though no less evident upon inspection, is that the aspects of context that are said to be relevant to fixing truth conditions are generally intended to be such as to yield an alignment between truth conditions and the speaker's and audience's own standards, dispositionally- or normatively-constituted, for the advancement and acceptance of the claims at issue. This alignment has two pleasing effects. First, it renders our claims true—so long as we adhere to our own standards. Second, it reduces the susceptibility of claims made in one discursive context to conflict with claims made in other discursive contexts—for such claims are more likely to have unrelated truth conditions. Both of these effects are exploited in the two solutions just discussed. In each case there is an apparent conflict amongst claims all of which we are strongly inclined to endorse. Conventional philosophy assumes that we are wrong about

¹⁵It also requires that these dispositions have a certain shape, which might be doubted on both empirical and conceptual grounds.

something, and then endeavors to figure out exactly what that is. The contextualist approach is to deny that the conflict is genuine. The claims are all true, but because they are advanced in contexts in which our standards of application differ (as evidenced by the very fact that our intuitions seem to be in conflict), they are not in conflict.

This observation prompts a tentative suggestion with which I will close this section: that recognizing the provincialist character of much ‘contextualist’ thought enables us to locate this contemporary development in a certain venerable philosophical tradition. At least since Protagoras, there have been philosophers inclined to perceive a dependence of what is true on what we take to be true. Call this general orientation *subjectivism*. The history of philosophy reveals limitless ingenuity in finding ways to institutionalize this orientation in philosophical theory. When one subjectivist theory loses favor as its problems become manifest, another arises to take its place. ‘Contextualism’, I suggest, is the latest stage in this dynamic. What is new is the idea that the dependence of truth on subjectivity arises from the pragmatic forces that shape the significance of language in use, and the corollary that it is participants to a local discourse who are the measure of all things. And what is open to question is precisely the assumption that this dependence is really ushered onto the scene by the pragmatic forces that shape the significance of language in use.

§6. Conclusion

My main aim has been to establish that, contrary to the evident assumption of much of the contextualist literature, we cannot move directly from the principle that the truth conditions attached to speech acts are shaped by the focus and interests of conversational participants to provincialist accounts of this or that area of discourse. ‘Contextualism’ in that sense is not an automatic upshot of the pragmatic turn. I have tried to provide some conceptual and empirical tools for thinking about the questions that arise when the assumption is seen to

be erroneous.

The core of my case has been the close examination of a single example. For the purposes just described, a single example suffices. But how confident can we be that the empirical points that emerged in this examination apply more widely? This is a question for another occasion. But I will end by briefly discussing some considerations relevant to it.

First, the example of “rich” is appealing to contextualists because they take economic contextualism to be an obvious application of pragmatism. That economic contextualism is not an obvious application of pragmatism—that what Richard takes for granted about how the interests and aims underwriting the application of “rich” by people like Naomi shape the truth conditions of their claims is in fact highly doubtful—ought to serve as a cautionary lesson. In a literature where practitioners are strongly inclined to take as dispositive people’s initial intuitions about the significance of given uses of language, it is productive to recognize that even the most seemingly trustworthy such intuitions can fall apart under scrutiny.

Second, the hypotheses raised with respect to “rich” clearly admit of generalization. They appeal to psychological mechanisms already familiar both to ordinary ‘folk psychologists’ and to the psychological sciences, mechanisms whose roles in human behavior and cognition we have excellent reason to believe to be pervasive. And as I noted in §5.1, there are several other familiar psychological and sociological processes that can be responsible for a divergence of truth conditions and conversational standards. The variety and breadth of these mechanisms and processes suggest that what I have claimed contextualists to take for granted should never be taken for granted. In particular, I believe it is not at all difficult to see how a range of these mechanisms might plausibly be deployed to explain divergences in conversational standards for just the terms that most occupy philosophical contextualists: terms of moral and epistemic appraisal.¹⁶

¹⁶For the suggestion the bias can explain divergences in the standards governing use of “know”, see Williamson (2005).

Finally, setting aside the question of this or that particular case, I would be happy if the discussion of “rich” at least generates the suspicion that if we accept pragmatism, we should be prepared to find it *difficult* to arrive at well-justified interpretations of the truth conditions of utterances. If the truth conditions of an assertion are shaped by the aims, interests and focus that inform the production and reception of that assertion, then determining those truth conditions will be at least as hard as determining the character of those aims, interests and focus. And those determinations can be hard indeed.

In other words, pragmatism motivates a methodology:

Methodological pragmatism. To understand the truth conditions of a given claim (statement, assertion), endeavor to understand as thoroughly as you can the relevant aims, interests, and focuses of the participants in the discourse to which the claim belongs.

It is one way to put my central complaint that contextualists do not practice methodological pragmatism.¹⁷

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¹⁷Many thanks to Elisabeth Camp, Keith DeRose, Nat Hansen, John MacFarlane, Ram Neta, François Recanati, Josef Stern, Malte Willer and participants at talks at Northwestern University and the University of Cincinnati for helpful comments on versions of this material.

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