

# CONTEXTUALISM WITHOUT INCOMPLETENESS

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## ABSTRACT

After summarizing the main intuitions and lines of reasoning at the basis of contextualism, I focus on the so-called Incompleteness Argument. I examine the discussion and rejection of this argument by Cappelen and Lepore (2005) and recognize that there are indeed some puzzling aspects to the intuition upon which the argument is based. After discussing why the incompleteness intuition seems to apply arbitrarily and be liable to infinite regress, and how it may have originated, I conclude that it is a misleading response to the situatedness of our speech and that it can be explained away without rejecting contextualism.

**Key words:** context, contextualism, semantic incompleteness, truth-conditions, truth-evaluation.

## 1. The contextualist puzzle

Contextualism gets started when it is observed that utterances of the same non-indexical sentence occurring in different contexts may get different evaluations as to truth or falsity. Let us cite some well-known examples, representative of some varieties of sentences for which the above-mentioned observation holds (albeit by no means exhaustive of those varieties and not meant to suggest a classification):

- (1) John is ready.
- (2) The apple is red.
- (3) It's raining.
- (4) There's milk in the fridge.

(1) might be deemed to be true in a context in which John's readiness to go out in the rain is salient and false in a context in which his readiness for an exam is at issue; (2) might be deemed to be true, with reference to the very same apple, if we are looking for ripe apples, but false if we are sorting sound apples from apples

with red spots in their flesh; (3) might be deemed to be true or to be false depending on the salient location; (4) might be deemed to be false if we are looking for drinkable milk in the fridge, but true if we are checking whether all traces of spilt milk in our fridge have been cleaned up.

When we accept these considerations, we are already (generally speaking) in a contextualist frame of mind. But then we face a puzzle. Such contextual variations in the evaluation of utterances as to truth or falsity apparently violate the well-established principle that the meaning of a sentence consists of its truth-conditions. For, if the uttered sentence is the same, provided it is nonindexical and unambiguous, the meaning of its utterances should be the same; if meaning is truth-conditions, truth-conditions should be the same; if the different utterances are evaluated all in the same, usual actual world, their evaluation should yield the same truth-value. But something seems to go wrong in this chain in the case of utterances of such sentences as (1)-(4). There are three main explanations for the trouble it might be: (a) that the sentence is covertly indexical, (b) that it does not determine full-blown truth-conditions, or (c) that truth-evaluation is not a matter of assigning a truth-value in a world to the sentence uttered, on the basis of its meaning, a truth-value in a world. The first solution is indexical (let us call it, with Recanati 2004, “indexicalism”): it traces back the worrying contextual variation in truth-value to the well-known and delimited phenomenon of indexicality, at the price of enlarging the class of indexical expressions or of admitting of “hidden indexicals” to be filled in by resort to context (see e.g. Stanley 2000). Indexicalism may be considered a “moderate” form of contextualism (Cappelen & Lepore 2005, 8-9; Borg 2007, 343-6), which saves the primacy of the rules of the language (as is noted by Recanati 2004, 85 ff., who for this reason considers indexicalism as a kind of “literalism”, as opposed to contextualism). The second solution (often called “radical” contextualism) claims that the semantics of the uttered sentence underdetermines the utterance’s truth-conditions and defers the final step in determining them to pragmatic processes. So for one sentence, used in different contexts, we may have several different expressed propositions while each of these propositions, evaluated at the actual world, yields a constant truth-value (Bezuidenhout 2002, Carston 2002, Recanati 2002). The third solution is rarely explored. It looks for the source of the trouble in the way in which meaning as truth-conditions, or as the proposition expressed by the utterance, is supposed to link utterances of sentences to truth and falsity.

Here, I will not discuss the contrast between the indexicalist solution and the radical-contextualist solution. I am interested in the contrast between these two solutions and possible solutions of the third kind. Any such solution would introduce some economy into the ontology of semantics, by avoiding multiplying the meanings (or truth-conditional contents, or propositions) to be attributed to utterances of the same sentence or even making propositions dispensable. Recently, a “nonindexical contextualism” has been proposed (MacFarlane 2009), according to which utterances of the same sentence may well have the same meaning, and even express the same proposition, in differ-

ent contexts, but differ in truth-value because of the different circumstances, fixed by context-dependent parameters, with respect to which they have to be evaluated. Another proposal comes from Gauker's work on the role of context in semantics (1998, 2003). In his (2003), Gauker presents a view of language which he admits to be a kind of contextualism (2003, 284-5): I will call it "objective contextualism". In this view, sentences are evaluated as assertible (and therefore true), deniable (and therefore false), or neither assertible nor deniable relative to the context pertinent to the conversation. A context is a structure built from linguistic objects (such as atomic sentences and negations of atomic sentences) and the contents of the context pertinent to a conversation are selected by the goals of the conversation and the state of the world (2003, 55-63). Both in MacFarlane's and in Gauker's view, the contextual variation in the truth-evaluation of utterances of the same sentence is explained as something that pertains to evaluation itself. The third solution to the contextualist puzzle they both pursue may therefore be called the "evaluationist" solution.

Among the argumentative strategies that have been used to introduce or support contextualism there is what Cappelen and Lepore (2005) have discussed under the name of the Incompleteness Argument. This argument relies on incompleteness intuitions as regards the truth-conditions of sentences and supports radical contextualism in particular. Cappelen and Lepore (2005, 59-68) use it to reduce indexicalism to radical contextualism, but then reject the latter by arguing that the arguments supporting it, including the Incompleteness Argument, are flawed. They argue for the conclusion that contextualism should be abandoned altogether and support given to semantic minimalism, according to which utterances of sentences express in any case and first of all a "minimal proposition", determined by the syntactic and semantic rules of the language and identifiable disquotationally (so that e.g. "John is ready" expresses the minimal proposition that John is ready). I will now examine the incompleteness argument and explore why it is flawed. I will suggest that disposing of it does not amount to rejecting contextualism altogether, but is compatible with an evaluationist solution to the contextualist puzzle.

## 2. The Incompleteness Argument

Here is my proposed reconstruction of the Incompleteness Argument, partly inspired by the reconstruction put forward by Cappelen and Lepore (2005, 11). I formulate the argument with respect to each of our examples (1)-(4), appending short comments.

(IA) (1) Nina has uttered "John is ready". Is her utterance true or false? If the proposition expressed by her utterance were just that John is ready, that alone would not assign to the utterance of "John is ready" its truth-value, because, intuitively, the world cannot be such that John is ready *simpliciter* (for example, John might be ready to go out but not ready for his exam). Rather, what is expressed by the sentence "John is

ready”, namely, that John is ready, is not the entire proposition that its utterance is in the business of expressing. In order for an utterance of “John is ready” to be assigned its truth-value, its content has to be supplemented with more material, to be drawn from the context of utterance. So the truth-conditions of utterances of “John is ready”, and therefore the propositions they express, vary with context.

Comment: here the problem is with the predicate “is ready”. Its extension appears to change from one occasion to another. Indeed, if “is ready” were assigned an invariant extension such as the set of all entities that are ready for something or other, “John is ready” should be deemed to be true on far more occasions of utterance than we actually deem it to be such. But it appears more intuitive to say that we cannot establish whether utterances of (1) are true or false unless we know with what aim or goal the predicate “is ready” is associated on the specific occasion.

(IA) (2) Nina has uttered “The apple is red”. Is her utterance true or false? If the proposition expressed by her utterance were just that the apple is red, this alone would not assign to the utterance of “The apple is red” its truth-value, because, intuitively, the world cannot be such that the apple is red *simpliciter* (for example, the apple might be red in its flesh because of a fungus, but not be red on the outside). Rather, what is expressed by the sentence “The apple is red”, namely, that the apple is red, is not the entire proposition that its utterance is in the business of expressing. In order for an utterance of “The apple is red” to be assigned its truth-value, its content has to be supplemented with more material, to be drawn from the context of utterance. So the truth-conditions of utterances of “The apple is red”, and therefore the propositions they express, vary with context.

Comment: Here the problem may be with the predicate or with that which it applies to. If we want to refer by “the apple” to a certain apple taken as a whole, we cannot assign an invariant extension to “is red”, for that would include all things that are red in one part or other, which would make true more utterances of the sentence than our intuitions would allow. If we want to assign to “is red” its most straightforward invariant extension (including all and only those things that are completely red), we have to take it as applying not to the apple as a whole, but to salient parts of it (the skin; the spots), or else most utterances of the sentence would turn out to be false.

(IA) (3) Nina has uttered “It’s raining”. Is her utterance true or false? If the proposition expressed by her utterance were just that it’s raining, this alone would not assign to her utterance its truth-value, because, intuitively, the world cannot be such that it’s raining *simpliciter* (for example, it might be raining in Trieste but not in Rome). Rather, what is expressed by the sentence “It’s raining”, namely, that it’s raining, is not the entire proposition that its utterance is in the business of expressing. In order for an utterance of “It’s raining” to be assigned its truth-value, its content has to be supplemented with more material, to be drawn from the context of utterance. So the truth-conditions of utterances of “It’s raining”, and therefore the propositions they express, vary with context.

Comment: In case (3), the problem which arises is that getting the correct truth-conditions for the utterance of the whole sentence requires us to specify the location where rain is said to occur. This may be due to the meaning of the verb ‘to rain’ (if, as suggested by Perry 1993, it denotes a relation between times and places) or to pragmatic reasons (as claimed by Recanati 2002), that is, to the fact that in most occasions of use, we do not utter (3) to convey the trivial information that it is raining in any location whatsoever. In both cases the problem which arises with (3) tends to generalize: in the former, because other verbs may share with ‘to rain’ the property of denoting a relation involving places too; in the latter, because for any sentence whose utterances are likely to be trivially true, some expansion or enrichment is required in order to determine the correct truth-conditions of most of its utterances.

(IA) (4) Nina has uttered “There’s milk in the fridge”. Is her utterance true or false? If the proposition expressed by “There’s milk in the fridge” were just that there’s milk in the fridge, this alone would not assign to the utterance of “There’s milk in the fridge” its truth-value, because, intuitively, the world cannot be such that there’s milk in the fridge *simpliciter*. Rather, what is expressed by the sentence “There’s milk in the fridge”, namely, that there’s milk in the fridge, is not the entire proposition that its utterance is in the business of expressing. In order for an utterance of “There’s milk in the fridge” to be assigned its truth-value, its content has to be supplemented with more material, to be drawn from the context of utterance. So the truth-conditions of utterances of “There’s milk in the fridge”, and therefore the propositions they express, vary with context.

Comment: With utterances of sentence (4) we affirm the presence of (some quantity of) a natural kind, milk, in a certain container, the fridge. How much milk, in what form, for what use, where exactly in the fridge, is not said. There is nothing incomplete in using “milk” to refer to a natural kind, but we might not count as presence of “milk”, on occasion, its presence in certain very small quantities, or in certain forms, or for certain aims. The fridge too is an object different parts of which may be salient on different occasions. The complexity of this case exemplifies what may be called “top-down” context-dependency (Bianchi 2001, 152-3), that is, the dependency of the whole proposition expressed by uttering (4) on the context as a whole, as opposed to the dependency of the interpretation of some component part of (4) on specific information to be found in the context.

The argument applies to (1) most intuitively. Here it seems that what is expressed by “John is ready” is indeed in need of completion (Bach 1994), as if it had a linguistically mandated empty slot to be filled in by specifying the activity or event for which John is said to be ready. Such applications of the argument can indeed be used to support indexicalism. But already in case (2) the indexicalist solution loses credibility. Of course what appears coloured is always an exposed surface. That’s how we come to see colours. But should then “red”, like any other colour word, be analysed as meaning “red

on surface  $x$ ”? Rather, there seems to be something incomplete about the truth-conditions of the attribution of a colour to an object, insofar as it is not specified what part or exposed surface of the object is referred to. The alleged incompleteness is no longer a matter of filling in an empty slot associated with the word “red” by linguistic rules: example (2) has in fact been used by Bezuidenhout (2002) in support of radical contextualism. Example (3) is even farther from being a manifest case of incompleteness. We may well feel that (3) is far from unable to determine a truth-value (Bach 1994, Recanati 2004, 9-10): if it is raining at least in one location on earth, then it is literally true that it’s raining. Still, it may be felt that the content expressed by the sentence “It’s raining” is in need of being supplemented with further material, and specifically with the location of the alleged rain, if the utterance of that sentence is to be recognized as having the truth-conditions it really has in its context. Example (4), at first sight, does not appear as a case of incompleteness at all. It is credited with incompleteness only after considering that it too is subject to contextual variation in the truth-evaluation of its utterances, insofar as the explanation envisaged for such variation is that the sentence uttered does not determine the truth-conditions of its utterances completely. In this case, it will be said that the truth-conditions of utterances of (4) need to be supplemented with material from the context, namely, the form in which milk is said to be present in the fridge (drinkable milk in an appropriate container as opposed to drops of spilt milk at the bottom and on the walls).

These are the lines of reasoning, slightly different in different cases, along which sentences (1)-(4) may all appear to call for a completion or fleshing out of truth-conditions with material from their context of utterance (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Travis 2000, Bezuidenhout 2002, Carston 2002). The argument appears as apt to introduce contextualism in general (its most intuitive case, IA (1), suggests an indexicalist solution to the contextualist puzzle), but lends particular support to the underdeterminacy or radical-contextualist solution, which is implicit in its least intuitive application, IA (4).

### 3. Cappelen and Lepore on the Incompleteness Argument

The Incompleteness Argument is puzzling in various respects. Why should contextual variability in truth-evaluation be traced back to incompleteness of linguistically determined content? Why should the fact that, to assign an utterance a truth-value, it is not enough to rely on the result of disquotation, imply that the sentence uttered only expresses an incomplete proposition? This connection relies on what may be called the incompleteness intuition. To understand what is at issue in the Incompleteness Argument, then, it is useful to be clearer about the sources and the implications of this intuition.

Cappelen and Lepore (2005, 156-75), in their defense of semantic minimalism against the Incompleteness Argument, attack the incompleteness intuition. They claim that

the very idea that there must be something incomplete in the truth-conditions of the sentence uttered is misguided and irrelevant to semantics: what is really at issue is, according to them, a matter of ontology. Thus, they attempt to explain away the incompleteness intuition as prompted by metaphysical worries. Their discussion highlights two main kinds of such worries: those concerning semantic entities and those concerning states of affairs in the world.

As to semantic entities, Cappelen and Lepore depict contextualists as believing that expressions such as, “the proposition that John is ready for an exam” pick out a real proposition, while expressions such as “the proposition that John is ready” fail to do so. This standpoint is, they point out, arbitrary: if there are ontological problems with one of these alleged propositions, they should affect the other as well. Against contextualists, Cappelen and Lepore maintain that disquotation suffices to identify, for each sentence, a “minimal semantic proposition”, which can then be accepted as a semantic entity.

As to states of affairs in the world, the problem which actually worries the contextualists is, according to Cappelen and Lepore, how to cut the world into states of affairs. They describe the contextualist’s incompleteness intuition as a feeling that a sentence such as “John is ready” or “It’s raining” does not by itself enable us to understand (to borrow Wittgenstein’s idea from the *Tractatus*) what the world is like when it is true, and thus does not by itself represent a (possible) state of affairs. Cappelen and Lepore attribute to the contextualists the belief that this is so because there is no such state of affairs, while other states of affairs, more finely cut, do exist and can be represented, not so much by sentences but by contextualized utterances thereof. The contextualists are thus depicted as in search of the right degree of finesse in cutting the world into states of affairs, that is, as wondering how finely cut entities states of affairs are. But, Cappelen and Lepore claim, whether there can be a state of affairs such as John’s being ready or, rather, there can exist only more finely cut ones such as John’s being ready for an exam or John’s being ready to go out, is a matter of the ontological structure of the world (of its building blocks, so to speak), not a matter of meaning, and is therefore irrelevant to semantics.

Does this two-fold criticism yield a fair diagnosis of the flaws of the Incompleteness Argument? Two main doubts may be cast upon it, respectively concerning (i) the alleged arbitrariness in the application of the incompleteness intuition and (ii) the idea that the incompleteness intuition expresses metaphysical worries about the building blocks of the world.

(i) The claim that the incompleteness intuition applies to semantic entities arbitrarily is the ontological facet of the claim that contextualism is liable to generate some kind of infinite regress, that is, that once we agree to supplement the disquotational content of a sentence with material from its context of utterance, there is no principled way to decide where and when to stop. Cappelen and Lepore (2005, 63-5), relying on Travis



(1985), exploit this idea (also endorsed by Bianchi 2001 in support of radical contextualism) to argue that, if the Incompleteness Argument is valid, indexicalism (which amounts for them to moderate contextualism) collapses into radical contextualism. But is the disquotational content of an uttered sentence always equally in need of being supplemented? Indeed, if the incompleteness intuition can in principle arise as regards any sentence (it is very likely to do so, if it can arise with our example (4)), it can also arise as regards sentences constructed by adding to the contextualist's examples the linguistic specification, in non-indexical terms, of context-dependent details. But if we examine specific examples more closely, we see that there are situations in which objective salience factors block the recursive application of the incompleteness intuition. Consider

(3) It's raining.

If it's raining in Trieste, it may be raining in one neighbourhood or other and we might need to be more precise about which neighbourhood it is in which it is raining. More precisely if it is raining in the neighbourhood of Opicina, it might be the case that it is raining precisely in my garden (and not in other areas of the same neighbourhood). But should, or even could, we describe the situation in more detail? Can a state of affairs such as its being raining be located, say, on my horse-chestnut? Or on its eastward most leaf? Would such more "precise" locations still be locations of the same event, rain, or of an event of a different kind? Or consider

(1) John is ready.

Once it is specified that John is ready for an exam, rather than (say) ready to go out, would further information about the exam, e.g. its subject matter, still make a difference to the truth-conditions of an utterance of that sentence and therefore to the proposition it expresses? It seems it would not – unless John is expected to take two exams but is only actually ready for one, which however would be a case of ambiguity, not of underdeterminacy. But if, given an ontology of semantic entities, there are limits to what we can reasonably consider as incomplete, then there must be principled ways of distinguishing complete semantic entities from incomplete ones, and the incompleteness intuition does not apply arbitrarily.

(ii) As regards the second criticism that Cappelen and Lepore level at the incompleteness intuition, it can be conceded to them that there is some connection between the incompleteness intuition and certain metaphysical worries about the building blocks of the world. When one wonders in what respects and in how much detail the state of affairs that an utterance affirms to hold has to be depicted by the sentence uttered for the utterance to be truth-evaluable, what he or she is concerned with is not only a matter of semantics, that is, of assigning a meaning or content or a semantic value to a string of linguistic symbols, but at least in part a matter of ontology. Indeed, assuming a picture of the world as consisting of states of affairs and a picture of the truth-evalua-



bility of an utterance of a sentence as its yielding a representation of a possible state of affairs, in order for the utterance of a sentence to be truth-evaluable what it represents should qualify as a possible state of affairs, that is, something such that, if it were the case, would be a building block of the world. Whether it so qualifies depends on what kind of entities states of affairs are.

But, while metaphysical assumptions about states of affairs as building blocks of the world can be recognized as playing some role in prompting the incompleteness intuition, the question about the kind and degree of detail in which the state of affairs that an utterance affirms to hold has to be depicted by the sentence uttered for the utterance to be truth-evaluable cannot be reduced to a metaphysical question. Indeed, it is not concerned with the structure of the world *per se*. Rather, it is a question of what it is for an utterance to represent a possible state of affairs (correctly or incorrectly) and of what it is for us to understand what the world is like when the utterance is true. These problems are left untouched even if the metaphysical problem of the structure of the world *per se* is solved (or dissolved).

## 4. Contextualism and the incompleteness intuition

I have argued that Cappelen and Lepore's criticism of the Incompleteness Argument does not yield a completely fair diagnosis of its flaws. However, from the exposition and discussion of that criticism two puzzling aspects of the incompleteness intuition have emerged, which a contextualist theory of language should address: the arbitrariness in its application, yielding liability to infinite regress, and its relationship with metaphysical worries about semantic ontology. Are these inevitable features of contextualism? Can we explain away the liability of the incompleteness intuition to infinite regress without giving up contextualism altogether? Can contextualism co-exist with a semantic ontology not generating metaphysical worries?

### 4.1. Incompleteness and the nature of context

What exactly makes the application of the incompleteness intuition liable to infinite regress? I suspect that it depends at least in part on the basically cognitive, and therefore epistemic, character of the conception of context upon which contextualists are inclined to rely. Cognitive context consists of assumptions (whether of each individual participant or shared: I shall assume the former, because the difference is not directly relevant to our discussion, and because there is a tendency in the relevant literature to focus on the speaker's assumptions, defining the "common ground" as the set of those assumptions of the speaker that are also taken by him or her to be shared by hearers; cp. Stalnaker 2002). These assumptions describe parts and aspects of the world, such as objects (and the states in which they are) and events. Since (as is generally recognized)

any individual object or event, in spite of its unity, is in principle liable to be given an endless series of true descriptions, a person's awareness of the very same individual object or event may well generate a potentially unlimited series of assumptions about it. It is true that we cannot be aware of an unlimited number of assumptions at the same time. But still, with time, we can shift the focus of our attention and develop our awareness of the same object or event into a series of assumptions which has no principled limitation. When contextualists come to think that, before assessing an utterance as true or false, they need further information about what it says the world to be like, and look for such information in the speaker's cognitive context, it is as if they are asking the speaker for more and more detailed descriptions of the object, the state of the world, or the event at issue. There is no principled limit to the details that may be provided. It is therefore not surprising if, once the uttered sentence is supplemented with material from the context, its supplemented version, in which the relevant information is cast and which is meant to specify the expressed proposition, fails again to be exhaustive and turns out to need further supplementation.

Now, while description is an endless task, the world itself does not seem to be so made that every object or event in it can be split into parts or components in a potentially infinite number of ways without their ceasing to be what they are. An individual object, for example, is the object it is insofar as it behaves as a unit. We can refer to it insofar as we perceive it as a unit and zooming in on it beyond a certain detail does not give us a better grasp of it; rather, it may make us lose sight of it: reference to it cannot be reduced to, or replaced by, reference to its parts. The resistance individual objects thus display to being dealt with in terms disregarding their role as units is part of the constraints things and events in the world put on the ways in which one can deal with them. An objective, rather than cognitive, conception of context embodying such a constraint-setting function could help dispel the arbitrary, potentially never-ending character of the incompleteness intuition.

Such a conception of context has been developed and argued for by Gauker (1998, 2003, 2008b). In Gauker's objective contextualism, the context of a conversation is determined by how the world is and comprises what participants in the conversation should assert, or anyway take to be assertible, in order to optimize their chances of coordinating satisfactorily with one another in performing the activity in which their conversation is framed. Such a context is objective, as opposed to cognitive, since what portions of the world are indeed relevant to the ongoing activity and what these are actually like does not amount to anybody's cognitive state or depend on the cognitive states of the participants. It is also mind-transcendent, as Gauker emphasizes, because what portions of the world are relevant to the ongoing activity and what these actually are like may well be unknown to the participants (2003; 2008b, 152 ff.). Gauker's reference to assertibility in his definition of context (2003, 59-60) might be misleading, since it seems to recall epistemic requirements such as the availability of verification procedures, while the notion of assertibility in force is as objective as the same author's

notion of context. A sentence which is assertible in a context is for Gauker, basically, a sentence which it would be helpful for the participants to assert in that conversation (unless they all take it to be true already). Thus, a sentence's being assertible or not ultimately depends, for him, on what in the world is actually helpful to the achievement of the goal of the ongoing conversation. It is true that such a goal is not itself an objective matter, since it is the participants who set it. But once the goal of the conversation is set, it is up to the world and not to the participants what sentences are assertible in the context and what sentences are not. Once an objective conception of context such as Gauker's is adopted, the search for additional information, which contextualists claim we are committed to whenever we set out to assess an utterance as true or false, can easily be brought to a stop. For there will be a convenient degree of detail, constrained by the way the world is (as itself a determinant of context), for the reformulations of any given uttered sentence that may be prompted by the incompleteness intuition. We will come back to this below.

## 4.2. Incompleteness and propositionalism

Let us now turn to the allegedly metaphysical origins of the incompleteness intuition, particularly in connection to semantic ontology. It is to be pointed out that strictly speaking, what the Incompleteness Argument claims to be incomplete is not the uttered sentence, but the proposition it expresses. It is taken for granted that full-blown meaning has a propositional format, that is, specifies truth-conditions, and this assumption determines the need to supplement the disquotational content of the uttered sentence with material from its context of utterance whenever that disquotational content appears not to be straightforwardly truth-evaluable.

The notion of proposition looms large in contextualism. Both indexicalism and radical contextualism admit of propositions in their semantic ontology (as, by the way, Cappelen and Lepore also do).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, both the indexicalist and the underdeterminacy solution to the contextualist puzzle let the context-dependent variation in the proposition expressed bear the burden of explaining the contextual variability of truth-evaluations. This does not amount to "propositionalism" in the sense in which that term has been introduced by Kent Bach (Bach 2006; cp. Borg 2007, 347), since, obviously enough, contextualists do not maintain that "every indexical-free declarative sentence expresses a proposition". But indexicalism and radical contextualism can be said to endorse propositionalism in a broader sense, since they make their accounts of the contextual variability of truth-evaluations depend essentially on the assumption that every meaningful utterance of a declarative sentence expresses a proposition. We may

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<sup>1</sup> There are two main ways to define propositions: as sets of possible worlds or as structured entities (ordered pairs of propositional components). For our aims, it does not matter which definition is chosen, because they are both compatible with the more general idea that propositions constitute the truth-conditional content of speech acts and propositional attitudes.

characterize indexicalism and radical contextualism, taken together, as “propositional” contextualism.

But must contextualism be “propositional”? Couldn’t the burden of the context-dependent variation be shifted to the level of the truth/falsity assessment or (as most philosophers are used to saying) of “semantic evaluation”? Cappelen and Lepore come close to admitting that if a non-propositional contextualism, relying on direct intuitions about “the truth-value of utterances as such”, were possible, it would escape their criticism of the Incompleteness Argument. They reject such a contextualism rather hastily:

[...] we don’t know what it is to have intuitions about the truth value of utterances as such. If we are asked to have intuitions not about what an utterance says, asserts, claims, etc. but just about its truth value, we are at a loss. (Cappelen & Lepore 2005, 98)

But the very availability of such an hypothesis may well be worth attentive examination as a step in the direction of an “evaluational” contextualism, pursuing the “evaluationist” solution to the contextualist puzzle. In evaluational contextualism, propositions would not play the central role they do in “propositional” contextualism (whether indexicalist or radical-contextualist) and could even reveal superfluous entities, to be excluded from semantic ontology.

Indeed, an “evaluational” contextualism is possible. What is less clear is exactly what form it should take and what relationship it should bear to relativism about truth as recently put forward and discussed by several authors (see e.g. Kölbel 2002, Richard 2004, Recanati 2007). Here I will not tackle the second, broader issue, but merely assume (following MacFarlane 2009, 248) that evaluational contextualism can be distinguished from relativism because in the former, truth-evaluation depends on the context of the utterance to be assessed, while in the latter, it depends on the context of the assessment. As to the form that evaluational contextualism should take, I outline and briefly discuss two proposals, one put forward by MacFarlane (2007, 2009), the other inspired by Gauker’s objective contextualism (Gauker 2003). A thorough discussion of evaluational contextualism should consider other proposals too (e.g. Predelli 2005), but I take the standpoints of Gauker and MacFarlane as representative of two poles between which any attempt to formulate contextualist approaches of the evaluational kind could be placed.

### 4.3. Two kinds of evaluational contextualism

Evaluational contextualism has to explain how the evaluation of an uttered sentence can vary not as a result of the expression of different meanings, but at the level of evaluation itself. One way to do this is to have the utterance evaluated against something that varies with the occasion of utterance. But what is it that can be said to vary like this, and how should its variation be represented?

MacFarlane (2009), adopting a basically Kaplanian terminology (Kaplan 1989), claims that utterances of context-sensitive sentences are evaluated against a variable “circumstance of the context”. He proposes a distinction, partly inspired by Kompa (2002), between indexicality and context-sensitivity according to which, while indexical expressions are defined (as usual) as expressions whose content is determined by resorting to the context, context-sensitive expressions require contextually set parameters not in order to be assigned a content, but to get a semantic evaluation. The resulting contextualism, which MacFarlane calls “nonindexical”, is clearly a brand of evaluational contextualism in our sense, since it assigns the burden of the context-dependent variation in truth-evaluation no longer to an alleged context-dependent variation in the proposition expressed, but to variability in that which determines truth-evaluation. It also clearly opposes the appeal of propositional contextualism to the incompleteness intuition: the truth-evaluation of any utterance of a declarative sentence has to resort to the world of the context, but this does not make the proposition expressed incomplete (MacFarlane 2009, 243-4).

However, it is not easy for MacFarlane to explain how the circumstance of the context may vary. Indeed, if (as is customary) the circumstance of the context is identified with the world of the context *tout court*, there is little room for such variation. To solve this problem, MacFarlane (2009, 237, 244) proposes that the circumstance of the context should be represented as a pair, comprising (in addition to the world of the context) a context-dependent parameter relevant to the evaluation of what is said by the context-sensitive utterance. Thus we may obtain different circumstances of the context in the very same actual world. Since various kinds of parameters could be pertinent, depending on the kinds of context-sensitive expressions that appear in the uttered sentence, there arises a risk analogous (albeit not identical) to that of incompleteness, which is a potentially endless proliferation of parameters. MacFarlane’s solution of this further problem is to introduce a “counts as” parameter, which settles what things have to be like in order to have a given property and which is defined as a function from properties to *w*-intensions (where “*w*-intensions” are functions from worlds to extensions) (2009, 246; cp. MacFarlane 2007). He claims that the introduction of such a parameter suffices to block the proliferation of new parameters. Although I find MacFarlane’s way of tackling the contextualist puzzle very interesting, it is not clear to me whether his “counts as” parameter actually manages to account for variability in semantic evaluation in a unified manner. Indeed, given the complexity of the factors determining context-sensitivity at the level of evaluation, it is difficult to figure out a set of values for such a parameter belonging to one and the same dimension. Moreover, since intension belongs with content, one may wonder whether the “counts as” parameter, as a function from properties to *w*-intensions, can really contribute to determining the semantic evaluation of the utterance without getting entangled at the same time with the level of content, which might lead MacFarlane’s theory back to propositional contextualism.

A different way of explaining how the circumstance of the context varies follows from the objective contextualism put forward by Gauker (1998, 2003): the “circumstance of the context”, in this perspective, amounts to the objective context itself, which is no longer an entire world (whether on its own or in a pair with a parameter), but a selection from the pertinent world, guided by the goal of the ongoing conversation. It is obvious that such a selection varies with the goal of the conversation. And, as has been noted above, in this case no incompleteness problem or other infinite regress problem arises, since the way the world is will constrain the degree of detail required of a sentence in order to be assertible (or deniable) and therefore true or false in its context.

So, evaluational contextualism has at least two ways of acknowledging what we might call the situatedness of the circumstance of evaluation: by recognizing it to be determined in a context-dependent way, or by assigning the evaluational role to context itself (which may be done if it is conceived of as objective, as proposed by Gauker). In both cases, by placing the burden of the context-dependent variation directly on the process of evaluation, evaluational contextualism has no need to assume that the propositions expressed by utterances of the same sentence change with context or, *a fortiori*, that they change by being supplemented on different occasions with different material from the context. But for this very reason, evaluational contextualism could even question the existence of propositions. Should it admit of propositions at all? Is it still in need of intermediate entities between sentences and truth-evaluations? Or would it profit from dropping propositions altogether?

The proposals put forward by Gauker (2003) and by MacFarlane (2009) are on opposite sides with respect to these questions. MacFarlane’s nonindexical contextualism does not challenge the notion of content, which remains the intermediary between linguistic expressions and their semantic values, or that of proposition. This may be an advantage for his perspective, since it enables us to give a simple name to the entity which is subject to truth-evaluation, and keeps the discussion within the overall framework of a semantic theory envisaging the received steps: from character to content or intension, from content to semantic value or extension. One problem is that the “counts as” parameter may not be suitable for coping with all kinds of context-sensitivity phenomena at the sole level of truth-evaluation. Gauker is critical of the received notion of content and therefore of propositions (see e.g. 2003, 5, 68), which his objective contextualism tends to abandon, assigning truth and falsity not to the propositions expressed by utterances of sentences nor to sentences as such, but to sentences in context (2003, 191 ff.). His view of the nature and role of context presents each sentence which is assertible in a context as bearing a connection, going beyond its formal relations and actual epistemic acknowledgement, to the other sentences that are assertible in that context, such that taking one such sentence to be true leads the participants in the conversation to the achievement of their goal only insofar as the others too are taken to be true (cp. Gauker 2003, 56-7). Dispensing with propositions by focusing on sentences in context has an advantage, since it provides a radical solution to all the

puzzles posed by the incompleteness intuition. If there are no propositions, there is no issue of whether an alleged proposition is complete or not, no issue of incompleteness, no delusion of supporting contextualism by appealing to an incompleteness intuition. The objectively determined connection of each sentence which is assertible in a context with other sentences in the context may be exploited to shed light on the phenomena which, within propositional contextualism, prompt the incompleteness intuition. The main disadvantage of such a view is that it is highly demanding in terms of the reconceptualization of many aspects of semantic theory and of their reformulation into a proposition-free semantic metalanguage.<sup>2</sup>

Here, I will not argue for one of these two ways towards evaluational contextualism against the other. For the aims of the present paper, it suffices to show that either is available. With the aim of showing how an evaluationist solution to the contextualist puzzle can be put to work, in the next section I will tentatively apply Gauker's objective contextualism (or more precisely, my reading thereof) to our initial examples (1)-(4).

## 5. Disposing of incompleteness: a contextualist way

So let us see what happens if we drop propositions and apply the conception of objective context outlined above to sentences whose utterances have been recognized to display contextual variability in their evaluations as to truth and falsity. If Nina announces

(1) John is ready

to Paul who is waiting for him to go out together, the sentence "John is expected to come" belongs to the set of sentences that specifies the context and the participants in the conversation either assume, or should assume it to be true. If some participant does not entertain this assumption,

it makes sense for Nina to actually utter that sentence, unless that participant can be expected to retrieve it by him or herself (for example, by reasoning from some Gricean maxim or other heuristic principle). If Nina states

(2) The apple is red

while sorting sound apples from apples with red spots in their flesh, sentences such as "Red apples have red spots in their flesh" belong to the set of sentences specifying the context; if, indeed, the participants in the conversation are unlikely to utter such sentences, this is only because it is clear enough from the ongoing activity that what is at issue is whether apples are red in their flesh. For example, Nina would certainly address an utterance such as "Red apples have red spots in their flesh" to a newcomer who has volunteered to help.

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<sup>2</sup> Gauker seems to admit this difficulty in his 2008a, 361, where he agrees, for his purposes there, to speak of utterances as expressing propositions.



If Nina reports to Paul

(3) It's raining

after exploring on the web what the weather is like at the location for which they are leaving, the set of sentences specifying the context is limited to sentences spelling out data about weather for that location and whoever understands (3) as describing the weather state for the location at which they currently are misunderstands not merely Nina's utterance but the activity in which she and Jack are engaged. The set of sentences specifying the context comprises "Nina and Paul are leaving for Cortina" and "Nina has read on the web what the weather is like in Cortina", which are unlikely to be uttered insofar as the participants in the conversation, Nina and Paul, are both already aware they hold. For the same reason, also "It is raining in Cortina" belongs to the set of sentences specifying the context, but is unlikely to be uttered. We would replace (3) with "It is raining in Cortina" only if we had reason to believe that a participant in the conversation does not realize what is at issue. Finally, if Nina protests

(4) There is milk in the fridge

after noticing that Paul (who was expected to clean up the fridge) has left it dirty, the set of sentences specifying the context does not contain either "There is half a pint of skimmed milk in the fridge" or its negation (it is not relevant for the current activity whether there happens to be a half-a-pint carton of milk in the fridge or not), while it contains "The fridge has not been cleaned up properly". It is in the background of the context, and therefore in the context of other sentences, that any sentence we utter can perform its job. These other sentences do not need to be uttered; but, for example, if Paul who was expected to clean up the fridge has forgotten to and replies to (4) "No, thanks, I don't drink milk", Nina will have to spell out some of them in order to remind him of those aspects of the situation which are relevant to what she was intending to do with her utterance (i.e. reproach Paul for not cleaning up the fridge).

In all of these cases, what in propositional contextualism appears as a need of supplementing something incomplete may be dealt with by specifying the context against which the uttered sentence has to be evaluated. The sentence itself, or whatever it may be said to "express", is not incomplete, but any use of it is situated. The incompleteness intuition appears therefore to be a misleading response to the situatedness of our speech.

The contextualist intuition that the evaluation of the utterances of sentences such as (1)-(4) as true or false varies with context is not undermined if we dismiss incompleteness this way. Indeed, in order to understand the utterance of a sentence and to evaluate it as true or false, we need to collocate that sentence among others, which are determined by the occasion of utterance. So, it still holds that the same sentence, in the same world, is assertible and therefore true in a context which associates it with a certain set of sentences, while it fails to be assertible or even turns out to be deniable, and therefore false, in a context which associates it with a certain other set of sentences. An

utterance of (1), for example, may well be deemed true in a context which associates it with “John is expected to come”, while (in the same world and at the same time) it should be deemed false if the context were such as to associate it with “John has to take an exam tomorrow”. An utterance of (2) may be deemed true in a context which associates it with “Red apples have red spots in their flesh”, while (in the same world and at the same time) it should be deemed false if the context were such as to associate it with “Red apples have red skin”. An utterance of (3) may be deemed true in a context which associates it with “Nina has read on the web what the weather is like in Cortina” and with “It is raining in Cortina”, while it should be deemed false if the context were such as to associate it with “Nina and Paul are going out for a walk”, “It is sunny in London”. An utterance of (4) may be deemed true in a context which associates it with “The fridge has not been cleaned up properly”, while it should be deemed false if the context were such as to associate it with “There is no carton of milk in the fridge”.

Of course, in order to yield a complete treatment of these and other possible examples in the framework of objective contextualism, many refinements and clarifications would be necessary, for example as to the way in which a conversation may determine its objective context, the extent to which that context can be specified, the difference between a context as specified by the set of sentences objectively helpful with respect to the achievement of the goals of a conversation and the participants’ take on the context. However, by my tentative discussion of our examples (themselves not meant to exhaust the kinds of context-sensitive sentences, nor, for that matter, to suggest a typology), I hope to have shown that criticism of the Incompleteness Argument, far from undermining contextualism, may help us acknowledge the necessary situatedness of our speech, to which the incompleteness intuition appears to be a misleading response. That discussion also suggests that there may be advantages in adopting an evaluationist solution to the contextualist puzzle: it is in its light that the incompleteness intuition can be explained away without giving up contextualism.

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