

## Reply to John MacFarlane

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### Compatibility of Minimalism and Non-Indexical Contextualism (NIC)

In *Insensitive Semantics* (INS) and earlier work (see for example C&L (1997), (1998), (2004), (2005)) we defend a combination of two views: speech act pluralism and semantic minimalism. We're not alone advocating speech act pluralism; a modified version of it can be found in Mark Richard (1998), and we're delighted to have found a recent ally in Scott Soames (see chapter 3 of Soames (2001)<sup>1</sup>). There's less explicit support for minimalism, though we think it's one way to interpret parts of Donald Davidson's work. John MacFarlane's reply to INS made clear to us that there might be more minimalists than we thought and that MacFarlane is one of them. MacFarlane's Non-Indexical Contextualism (NIC) incorporates a version of semantic minimalism; this made us realize that others who sympathize with MacFarlane's view (for example Mark Richard (2003) and Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson (2005)) are, in effect, semantic minimalists.

MacFarlane is clear on this. He says:

"As far as I can see, the view I have just described is perfectly consistent with Semantic Minimalism, as Cappelen and Lepore have described it. It allows that "Chiara is tall" expresses the same proposition at every context of use (fixing girl and time). This proposition is not a "schema," but "a full-blooded proposition with truth conditions and a truth value," that is, a truth value at each circumstance of evaluation. ... the sentence "Chiara is tall"

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<sup>1</sup> There are interesting similarities between Chapter Three of Soames' *Beyond Rigidity* and our 1997 paper.

is not context-sensitive in the sense that it expresses different propositions at different contexts. ... Cappelen and Lepore have demonstrated, [that] "tall" does not behave like an indexical. We treat it as if it expresses the same property at every context of use (hence the disquotational indirect reports)").

It is not just that NIC is *compatible* with minimalism -- as formulated it *incorporates* semantic minimalism. According to NIC there are minimal propositions, such as the proposition that *Naomi is rich*, and the proposition that *that Chiara is tall*. When we utter sentences such as "Naomi is rich" and "Chiara is tall" we express these propositions. These are the propositions semantically expressed by such utterances. That's a version of semantic minimalism.

NIC adds to minimalism a theory of truth. We don't take a stand on the nature of truth in INS, but there is not, as far as we can tell, any reason why we could not accept this as a friendly amendment.

Nonetheless, we're not ready to embrace NIC. First, we are not convinced by the motivation for NIC, i.e. we are not convinced that the so-called Intension Problem is a problem (and if it is, we're not sure why NIC is any better off dealing with it). Second, we suspect that if the intension problem is not a problem, then speech act pluralism makes NIC redundant.

### **Three Intension Problems**

What MacFarlane calls 'the intension problem' is not one problem, but rather a cluster of three distinct problems -- we call them IP#1, IP#2, and IP#3.

**IP#1:** "The intension problem is the problem of saying just what a world must be like if the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall is to be true at

that world" (p.7). Here the challenge to us is to give the conditions under which a proposition is true at a world.

**IP#2:** "In this setting, our question becomes: at which possible worlds is the minimal proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall true? I'll call this "the intension problem" for minimal propositions". (p.3) Here the challenge is to specify in which worlds the minimal propositions are true (notice: very different from specifying the conditions under which they are true in those worlds).

**IP#3:** Challenge: Explain why 'ordinary speakers' reject certain question as inappropriate or absurd. MacFarlane formulates this as the requirement that we should explain "ordinary speakers' rejection of the question in the dialogue above ("which is it really, big or small?") as somehow absurd or inappropriate" (p.7). We must explain why it is that 'ordinary speakers' "reject as inappropriate questions that ought to have perfectly definite answers if there is such a property as being (just plain) tall and that property has an intension." (7). The idea seems to be that there are certain ordinary language questions that should be appropriate on our view but that ordinary speakers treat as inappropriate.

These are different questions and they have different answers.

### ***Reply to IP#1***

The answer to IP#1 (i.e. to the question: "What must a world be like if the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall is to be true at that world?") is that Chiara must be tall at that world.

This answer has the advantage of being true, the disadvantage of being somewhat uninformative. Of course, the uninformativeness is to be expected

since these are *minimal* propositions, the requirement that we should be able to spell out, in other words, what it takes for them to be true is confused.

If you find the reply unpalatable, we have an entire chapter the goal of which is to make it more palatable (see Chapter 11 of INS). The strategy in that chapter is show that it is *no less* palatable than the claim that the proposition *that Chiara is tall for a giraffe* is true in *w* just in case Chiara is tall for a giraffe in *w*. Whatever reasons you have for finding claims about 'just plain tall' puzzling, you'll have for finding '(just plain) tall for a giraffe' puzzling. That argument is accepted by MacFarlane (at least on one interpretation of note 7.) So it is a bit unfair to run the argument on "tall", since, from his point of view, it could just as well have been run on "tall for a giraffe" and used to show that there's no such thing as being (just plain) tall for a giraffe. We present you with a choice: deny that there's such a thing as being tall for a G (for any G), or accept that there's such a thing as being tall. We opt for the first (again, this entire argument is spelled out in chapter 11 of INS).

In note 6 of his reply, MacFarlane considers the minimal response above and says about it:

"Of course there is an easy answer: it must be a world in which Chiara is tall (at such-and such a time). But this does not get us very far, as it does not help settle even the most basic questions about the intension of this proposition: Is it true at the actual world? Is it true at any worlds where Chiara is two inches tall?"

Notice: he switches from IP#1 to IP#2, i.e. he now asks us to *not* to respond to the question "what a world must be like if the proposition that Chiara is (just plain) tall is to be true at that world"), but to the question: is the proposition that Chiara is tall *true in w*?

So on we go to IP#2.

## ***Reply to IP#2***

Our reply to IP#2 can be summarized in five points:

1. *Semantics - Metaphysics Distinction*: IP#2 is an unreasonable question to ask us as semanticists. MacFarlane is asking us to decide whether a particular cat instantiates tallness. We're not in the business of deciding whether cats are tall or not. We're not the business of telling you anything about which sentences are true. We agree that we should tell you what a world must be like for the proposition *that Chiara is tall* to be true in that world; it is not our job, however, to tell you whether that proposition is true or not in some world *w*. We go to great lengths in the book arguing that that is a metaphysical task, not a semantic task (see chapter 11 of INS).

We also recognize that if we can say a little bit about how that metaphysical question can be dealt with, our view will seem more attractive to those with a strong metaphysical bent. We have four lines of reasoning that we hope will sway such metaphysicians: (the first two of which we don't explicitly mention in the book, but we now think are promising):

2. *Comparison to Discussions of Fairness and Happiness*: Think about expressions such as "fair", "just", "rational", "happy", "good", "fashionable", and "repulsive". These are gradable adjectives. If gradable adjectives are context sensitive because they are associated with a contextually determined comparison class or scale index, then "fair", "just", "rational", "happy", "good", etc, are context sensitive too. Remember, MacFarlane says that Minimalism without NIC is untenable because the question of what it is to be (just plain) tall in a world arises. That metaphysical question should not arise because it obviously doesn't have an answer. Any theory that implies that this question has an answer should be ruled

out, says MacFarlane. Well, by that line of reasoning, anyone who asks the questions "What is fairness?", "What is happiness?", "What is beauty?", etc, should be guilty of the same mistake. If someone asking such a question assumes that it has an answer *simpliciter* they are, according to MacFarlane, out of the game immediately. If it is absurd (or implausible or ...(pick your favorite derogatory term here)) to think that there is such a thing as being (just plain) tall in a world  $w$ , then it should be absurd (or implausible or...) to think there could be such a thing as being (just plain) fair, or (just plain) beautiful, or (just plain) happy. But if that is MacFarlane's view, then isn't it just an expression of a rather astonishing philosophical prejudice? Reasonable people have, for about 2000 years written very thick books about just these questions. They've tried to figure out what fairness is, what happiness is, and what beauty is. It strikes us as unreasonable to say that a theory is unacceptable just because it allows the asking of these questions. On the contrary, these questions have been the bread and butter of philosophy for a long, long time. They should not be ruled out as absurd before we even started thinking about them.

What would be absurd is to spend a lot of time thinking about what *tallness* or *fatness* is. That would be an absurd thing to do, because these are very boring topics with no philosophical import whatsoever.

Metaphysicians are better off spending their time on other issues. We might, however, hope (and assume) that whatever we learn from these more philosophically interesting cases, can be applied to the mundane terms like "tall", "rich", and "fat".

3. *Possibility of Error Theory*: What if it turns out that there are no good answers to the profound questions ("What is fairness?", "What is happiness?", etc) or that the answers to the profound questions don't extend to the less profound ones (e.g. "What is tallness?")? One option for

the minimalist would then be to explore the kind of error theory associated with J. Mackie's view of ethical statements. It does not follow from the world not containing any moral properties that moral statements shouldn't be understood as asserting that the world does contain such properties. We might just have a mistaken metaphysics embedded in our linguistic scheme, so to speak. This strategy should be pursued (and the relevant version of the error theory developed) by those convinced that these metaphysical questions have no answers. We're not yet convinced of that, so we do not pursue that option here.

4. *The Problem Generalizes*: As with IP#1, we argue (in chapter 11 of INS) that if you doubt there is any such thing as being *(just plain) tall*, then you should, for the very same reason, doubt that there's such a thing as being *(just plain) tall for a giraffe* or *(just plain) tall for a 3-year-old African giraffe*. More generally, your concern shouldn't be with *(just plain) tall* -- it's about *(just plain) F*, for any F. As far as we can tell, MacFarlane agrees with this (see his note 7), so it's a bit unfair to run the argument on "(just plain) tall" (see below for further discussion of this point).
5. *Some Initial forays into Metaphysics*: As MacFarlane mentions, we start doing a little bit of metaphysics. We hint at four possible solutions to IP#2, none of which we endorse. We mention them, just to remind our readers the kinds of moves metaphysicians with a perverse interest in tallness or readiness might have available to them.

These are the different components of our reply (all of them except 2 and 3 spelled out in more detail in INS). MacFarlane is aware of most of this, in particular of part 1. of our reply. He says:

Having argued to their satisfaction that "tall" is not context sensitive, they are content to leave it to the metaphysicians to sort out just what an object

has to be like in order to have the property “tall” invariantly expresses. The intension problem [note: here he means IP#2] is not, on their view, a problem for the semanticist. I have some sympathy with this response, but I think it misses the point.”

One interpretation of why he thinks our response misses the point is that he thinks we should explain certain reactions he claims to find in *ordinary, non-philosophical speakers*. At some point MacFarlane says: “Semantic Minimalism is problematic ... because it seems to presuppose that there are answers to these questions. And that is something that we, **as ordinary speakers**, do not seem to believe.” This is the kind of concern we tried to characterize as IP#3.

So on we go to IP#3.

### ***Reply to IP#3***

It is not clear to us exactly which questions ordinary speakers are supposed to treat as absurd or inappropriate: If we understand him right, MacFarlane thinks that 'ordinary speakers' find IP#2 absurd; that's supposed to be data in support of NIC. If NIC is correct, then the question of whether Naomi is (just plain) rich in w, or Chiara is just plain tall, or Rupert is just plain tall for a giraffe should be inappropriate/absurd. If that's how ordinary speakers react to such questions, that's support for NIC<sup>2</sup>.

Our answer to IP#3: We deny the data. Given the right setup, for example by doing some philosophy, you can get speakers to focus on the minimal content, but when they do, there's no clear inappropriateness in asking the relevant kinds of questions; you'll end up having the kind of discussion we are having today.

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<sup>2</sup> Inappropriateness is different from absurdity, and in what follows we focus on inappropriateness.

Of course, in a sense it is inappropriate to ask 'ordinary speakers' IP#2, but just because it is strange and annoying for non-philosophers to be asked theoretical and abstract questions about minimal propositions; these are not questions that *we* (i.e. C&L) can answer, so why should non-philosophers be able to answer them?<sup>3</sup>

Notice it doesn't follow from any of this that speakers are not aware of the semantic value of their terms, i.e. it does not follow that they are unaware of the minimal propositions, or that the minimal propositions are inaccessible to them (that's one of the worries MacFarlane raises for our view): ordinary speakers can identify the minimal proposition as the proposition *that Chiara is tall* and they know what it takes for that proposition to be true at a world, i.e. it is true just in case Chiara is tall. That's all that goes into semantic competence. It is not part of that competence to be able to answer IP#2.

### **IP#3 As a Problem for NIC**

Before we leave IP#3, we want to turn it around, against MacFarlane's NIC. We take this to be a datum: ordinary speakers do *not* think it is strange to be asked whether Chiara is (just plain) tall for a 3-year-old African giraffe in a world  $w^4$ . If, however, NIC were correct, they *should* find questions about whether Naomi is (just plain) tall for a 3-year-old African giraffe *inappropriate*. There's no such thing, according to NIC, as being (just plain) *anything*. So, there's no such thing as being just plain tall for a 3-year-old African giraffe. That view, it seems to us, is not in accord with ordinary speakers' reactions to "Is A (just plain) F" questions.

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<sup>3</sup> Notice that IP#1 and our answer to it will make perfect sense to speakers. It's when you ask them the IP#2 question, i.e. ask them to decide on whether a minimal proposition is true in a world, that they get a bit annoyed.

<sup>4</sup> Except they might be a little put off by the "(just plain)" part, but that's not essential to the example and we use it just to be consistent with MacFarlane's examples.

However, this is a bit tricky and we have to admit that we're not sure exactly what NIC predicts about 'ordinary' speakers' reactions. Remember: it's supposed to be really bad if the "Is A (just plain) F?"-questions make sense. But on a certain way of thinking about NIC, these questions should make sense to ordinary speakers. It all depends on how NIC predicts that an 'ordinary speaker' will react to the "(just plain)" part. To see the worry here, consider the following passage from his paper:

(3) In a context C1 where I'm talking about six year olds, the counts-as function might assign *to the property of being (just plain) tall* the same intension it assigns to the property of being tall-for-a-six-year-old. (our it.)

MacFarlane repeatedly uses the expression "the property of being (just plain) tall" in presenting his view. So that description must pick something out -- namely the property of being (just plain) tall. Now, it seems to also follow from NIC that the proposition expressed by an utterance of the sentence "x instantiates the property of being just plain tall", is true at a circumstance of evaluation E just in case x counts as having the property of (just plain) tallness relative to E. If so, IP#2-questions should make perfect sense to ordinary speakers. If NIC is true, they should interpret all such statements and questions relative to a parameter in the circumstance of evaluation; so interpreted, the question should make sense.

As we see it there are two options for MacFarlane:

- a. Adding the "(just plain)" part makes 'ordinary speakers' suspend the relativization to a 'counts as' parameter in the circumstance of evaluation; if so, *no* questions of the form "is A (just plain) F" should make sense to them. That's a problem for NIC because questions of the form "Is A (just plain) tall for a 3-year-old African Giraffe?" do seem to make sense to 'ordinary speakers'.

- b. Adding the "(just plain)" part does *not* make 'ordinary speakers' suspend reference to the 'count as' parameter. If so, all questions of the form "Is A (just plain) F?" should make sense, even the allegedly 'bad' ones, like "Is A (just plain) tall?". If so, the objection to minimalism can't be the one outlined above.

In short, it is hard for MacFarlane to articulate exactly what it is allowable to say on our view that it is *not* allowable to say on his view. You can do it in philosophy talk, i.e. by talking about circumstance of evaluations, "counts as" parameters, intensions, and such, but that's not something that 'ordinary' speakers find appropriate or inappropriate (absurd or not absurd). And it is hard to see exactly what NIC predicts about speakers reactions to the relevant non-philosophical questions.

### **Relativism and Pluralism**

If there's no intension problem to worry about, and if you endorse pluralism, it is not clear what work is done by NIC. Our suspicion is that whatever work is done by the extra parameter added to the circumstance of evaluation can just as well be done by adding a proposition to the totality of expressed speech act content. If that's so, there's no good reason for a speech act pluralist to endorse NIC.

Here's a way to see our worry: Consider an utterance of "Naomi is rich"; suppose the speaker intends her utterance to be true if Naomi counts as rich for a New Yorker (or, more generally, that New Yorkers constitute the salient comparison class in that context). According to NIC, this fact is captured by the 'counts as' parameter in the circumstance of evaluation. The proposition expressed is just the simple minimal, proposition *that Naomi is rich*. For the utterance to be true, i.e. to be true in the circumstance of the context, Naomi must count as rich for a New Yorker in *w* (where *w* is the world of the utterance). For the pluralist, this is captured by the assumption that she also said that Naomi is rich for a New

Yorker and this proposition is part of the speech act content. For a pluralist who doesn't endorse NIC, the utterance is true just in case Naomi is rich for a New Yorker in *w*. If a NIC proponent is also a pluralist, then it is unclear what extra work is done by the added parameter. We're not convinced that NIC does *any* work if you combine minimalism and pluralism in the way that we do.

Of course, MacFarlane could deny pluralism -- but then we're in a different kind of debate, one that we won't start here. We have, in a series of papers going back to 1997 and summarized in the book, argued extensively for pluralism. Maybe MacFarlane has arguments against this view; if so we would like to see them.

We should point out one particularly important reason why it is worth being a pluralist if you're a minimalist: there are contexts in which it is overwhelmingly natural to say about two people who utter "Naomi is rich" having different comparison classes in mind, that they *didn't* say the same thing. A pluralist can explain why that is: in addition to expressing the minimal proposition, they expressed other propositions -- one expressed the proposition that Naomi is rich for an *F*, the other the proposition that Naomi is rich for *G*. In that sense they didn't say the same. A semantic minimalist who is a speech act monist can't get that result -- and that's deeply counter intuitive. So we suggest that MacFarlane should also be a pluralist -- but then, if we're right, NIC doesn't do much work for him.

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