

Reply to Mark Richard's "Relativistic Content and Disagreement"

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Some of Richard's initial remarks strike a curiously critical tone. We noted that collective agreement tests provide only limited support to claims of shared content. Acknowledging this, Richard then argues that the relevant limitations do not carry over to collective disagreement reports. We agree. Indeed the points that he makes in this connection are ones that we ourselves make in the book (see e.g. RMT pp.62-63).

At the end of his Section one, Richard oversimplifies the dialectical situation considerably. He says that the upshot of our discussion in Chapter two is that there is a very strong argument for relativistic content. The situation in all the core cases is much more complicated. Take predicates of personal taste - 'fun' for example. There are indeed cases where standard contextualism predicts disparate content but where the disagreement diagnostic provides prima facie evidence for the claim of shared content promoted by a standard relativist view. But there are plenty of other cases where the predictions yielded by relativistic semantics do not sit well at all with the deliverances of that diagnostic (see e.g. RMT p.109). There is, thus, prima facie troubling data that each side has to explain away. Richard, like many relativists, is overly encouraged by a limited diet of examples.

Let us turn to the nature of disagreement, the topic of Richard's Section two. As Richard anticipates we are sympathetic to a pretty simple view of disagreement: We disagree about a proposition if one of us believes it and one of us believes the negation.¹ Some relativists – notably MacFarlane – have thought that there are considerations that show that such a view must be wrong, even leaving the general issue of relativism to the side. One paradigmatic argument of this sort is to the effect that if someone in world w_1 believes p and someone in world w_2 believes not- p , they are not thereby disagreeing. Richard displays some sympathy to this line of argument. He shouldn't. As we show in Chapter two, it is a terrible argument.

As we see it there is no good general argument against the simple view of disagreement. Suppose, however, one is a committed relativist, endorsing

¹ Talk of disagreement has its most natural application to belief, not to weighted credences.

parameterized content for a range of subject matters while also endorsing non-relativity of belief reports (whereby those parameters become irrelevant when the relevant contents are embedded in belief reports). Is the simple view of disagreement a promising option in *this* setting? Richard's thought – articulated also by MacFarlane and others – is that the analogue of the simple view ought not be endorsed by the lover of parameterization. To see why, consider the analogue of the simple view applied to a parameterized approach to tense and time. Someone who parameterizes for time (in the way that Kaplan does) holds the view that someone who believes what is expressed by 'There is a cat on the mat' on Tuesday believes the very same content that is rejected by someone who on Wednesday denies what is expressed by "There is a cat on the mat". The fact that it would be silly to say they disagree is taken by Richard to show that the simple view of disagreement is not suitable in this context. We think that the dismissal of the simple approach, even in this setting, is a little quick, since it fails to be careful about tense in the disagreement report: The simple approach does not say *that if x believes p and y used to believe not-p then x and y disagree*. The best version of the simple view is one that 'takes tense seriously'.

Given Richard's rejection of the simple view, he is faced with a question we do not have to confront: 'What does it take for disagreement beyond some person believing a content and someone else denying that very content?' For what it's worth, we think that it is a cost of any view that it is saddled with a distinction between disagreement on the one hand, and the relevant pattern of belief and denial on the other. Suppose one is a relativist who goes in for non-relativity of belief reports, a disquotational truth predicate and parameterized content but who, with Richard, thinks that some additional criteria need to be met for disagreement judgments to be correct beyond the relevant pattern of belief and denial. Then it is a short step to endorsing speeches of the following sort: 'She believes that what I believe is false, but she doesn't disagree with me'. But that speech sounds *terrible*. (Of course in the case of parameterized temporal contents one can save oneself from such speeches by being careful about tense, but, as we pointed out earlier, for that very reason such contents cannot be the grounds on which one breaks with a simple account of disagreement in the first place.)

Be that as it may, let us look at Richard's solution. His thought is that while the content of a particular belief or assertion can be evaluated relative to all sorts of values along the relevant relativistic parameters, there will be particular values of those parameters at which the belief or assertion are 'aimed'. In our lingo, crafted on behalf of the relativist: there are particular parameter values that are *operative* on a particular occasion of speech. In the Tuesday/Wednesday case, the content asserted is the content rejected, but a particular time on Tuesday was the operative time for the assertion, while a time on Wednesday was the operative time for the rejection. Now Richard gives a particular gloss on what it takes for a parameter value – or set of parameter values - to be operative: It is operative if it is *appropriate* to evaluate a belief or an assertoric performance relative to that parameter. Supposing there is just a single relevant parameterization, disagreement between x and y concerning some content is taken to require not only that one believes the content and the other denies it, but moreover, that there is some single parameter value along that parameterization that is operative for both the belief and its denial.

Take the case of 'fun'. Whether we are contextualist or relativist about 'The party will be fun' we can all agree that there are cases where it is inappropriate to evaluate a speech by one's own standards for fun. Suppose Jim has a terrible toothache and upon waking says 'Today won't be fun. I can't see the dentist until

tomorrow'. Meanwhile Jim's friend, who is having a birthday party, say 'Today will be fun. I'll get a big cake'. Whether we are contextualists or relativists we will be uncomfortable using the friend's speech as a basis for claiming that they have a real disagreement. This is a case where Richard wants to say that there is incompatibility without disagreement. But what Richard doesn't properly notice is that in such cases, intuitions of incompatibility disappear along with intuitions of disagreement. After all it would be strange for Jim's friend to say 'Jim believes that what I believe is false' or 'Jim contradicted me' or even to say 'That's false!' when he overhears Jim's speech in a setting where he is fully apprised of the relevant background facts. As we see it there is the following prima facie puzzle: While Jim's friend will *not* have an intuition of contradiction, he *will* be willing to say 'Jim believes that today won't be fun but I do'. But that pattern of data is explained by contextualism in combination with the relevant ground clearing about how beliefs reports work. A 'contradiction without disagreement' approach, by contrast, does not ring true at all.

One also wonders whether Richard's account of disagreement will be especially welcome to many contemporary relativists. Take MacFarlane's 'fish fingers' case. A five year old child says 'Fish fingers are tasty'. A grown up says 'Fish fingers are not tasty'. This is supposed to be a paradigm of disagreement. According to Richard's account this disagreement judgment is correct only if it is appropriate to evaluate the child's speech by the standards appropriate to grown ups. But how can that be appropriate? Insisting that adult and not childish tastes are the operative standards for the child's speech smacks of the very sort of chauvinism that relativists are trying to distance themselves from. On the other hand, conceding that the standards are disparate and hence that there is no real disagreement would put Richard in the same boat as the contextualist on the matter of disagreement and thus erase one of the purported advantages of relativism, namely its ability to take initially appealing judgments of disagreement at face value.

This is pertinent to Richard's discussion of disgust. Consider a case we discuss in the book. Certain tribes find kissing disgusting. We don't. An ordinary episode of kissing occurs between Stephanie and Alex. Some tribe member says 'That is disgusting'. We say 'There is nothing disgusting about that'. Relativists typically want to say that we disagree. Our general view is that while there is an initial temptation to a disagreement verdict, reflection on the ways that disgust reactions are subject to various vicissitudes of culture and physiology – what we called Pyrrhonian therapy – tend to make disagreements judgments evaporate, and this in turn helps to pave the way for a contextualist treatment of the matter. Now what is Richard's considered view supposed to be? If he thinks that it is appropriate to evaluate the tribesperson by the standards that are operative for us he is every bit as naïve and chauvinistic as the crudest village realist. If he concedes that it is not, then he will be forced to concede that, despite initial temptations to the contrary, there is no real disagreement between the kissing couple and the disgusted tribal onlookers. But that removes much of the dialectical machinery that relativists typically leverage against the contextualist. Indeed, speaking more abstractly, is there even such a thing as no fault disagreement – the alleged centrepiece in many pro-relativist monologues – on Richard's view? Where the appropriate standards for disgust judgments are different, there is no disagreement at all. *A fortiori* there fails to be no fault disagreement. Meanwhile if Bill says x is disgusting and Ben says x is not, and by *the standards appropriate to both speeches*, one is wrong, then in what sense is the disagreement a no fault one? (Of course one might point out that one of them was in no position to know that their speech failed to meet the appropriate standards. But that is hardly the

sense of 'no fault' that is at work in relativist apologetics.) In short Richard's own version of relativism is not going to be one well served by any 'argument from disagreement'.

Richard ends with a discussion of belief reports. He never tells us what, in his view, it takes to believe a relativistic content though we detect some sympathy with the non-relativity of belief, the idea that belief reports tend not to inherit the relativity of the contents they embed. His main focus is on driving a wedge between the felicitousness and correctness of such belief reports as 'Frank believes that there is something delicious in the fridge', said to a talking vulture on an occasion where the fridge has nothing but decomposing flesh in it. He denies that the belief ascription is correct and offers some pragmatic considerations to explain its felicity. It seems that his picture – at a rough first pass -- is that for Frank to believe that there is something delicious in the fridge it is necessary and sufficient that Frank believe that there is something delicious by the standards appropriate to Frank in the fridge. The relevant piece of pragmatics runs like this:

- First point: Sometimes we felicitously say 'X believes P' when X does not believe the content expressed by 'P' but instead believes some Q which together with some conversational presuppositions entail P. If in such a scenario P is conversationally relevant 'X believes P' may well be felicitous even though false.
- Second point: Sometimes we conversationally presuppose propositions we don't believe to be true. The felicity despite falsity of 'Frank believes that there is something delicious in the fridge' is then explained by combining these points, the relevant conversational presupposition being that whatever the vulture finds delicious is delicious.

Richard's illustrations of the first point are not always compelling. One of his key examples is:

Cassius thinks your friends are at the senate

said in a setting where it is the speaker and hearer but not Cassius who think that the relevant people are friends. Richard is aware that some might think of this as a scope phenomenon – scope out 'your friends' and the ascription won't semantically require that Cassius thinks of anyone as a friend of the addressee. Anticipating this kind of move Richard says:

"Those who think the example's point can be avoided by reading the ascription *de re* should construct variants in which 'friend' plays a predicative role while not occurring within an expression that could be interpreted as a singular term." (this vol., p...)

First note that this is not quite to the point since the wide scope manoeuvre does not require treating the expression in which 'friend' occurs as a singular term. All that is required is that a determiner phrase takes wide scope position with respect to an attitude verb and is then used as a vehicle for asserting or denying some type of singular thought (consider for example, the wide scope construal of 'Cassius thinks no friend of yours is at the Senate'.)

Second, we can do quite a bit to by pass wide scope manoeuvres. Suppose we think that all and only the Romans with red hair are happy. Suppose Cassius is oblivious to this but thinks Caius is a Roman with red hair. Consider now an utterance by us of:

Cassius thinks Caius is happy.

Richard's story seems to predict that it ought to be fairly easy to construct settings in which this ascription is felicitous under the assumptions outlined. Is it?

We shall end with three further considerations. First, the Richard strategy could be set in motion all over the place. Suppose Frank lives in San Francisco and plans to go to a bar local to where he lives. We say of Jim, who lives in Oxford, 'Jim believes Frank is going to go to a local bar'. One option is to adopt a contextualist semantics where this is straightforwardly true on the natural completion. An alternative strategy would be to offer a strange semantics according to which this is true only if Jim believes Frank is going to go to a bar local to Jim, and that the felicity of the report is explained by a conversational presupposition (that we know to be false) that whatever is local to Frank is local to Jim. This second strategy, while a move in logical space, is altogether unappetizing. We can't see what makes it so much more appetizing in the cases where Richard' endorses it.

Second, if Richard's view is something like (1):

(1) "x thinks y is fun" is true iff x thinks y is fun for x,

then we are will have to adopt pragmatic special pleading in a range of cases where the operative standard is a group that includes but is not restricted to x. But it strikes us as *prima facie* very odd to appeal to this complex pragmatic story in a case where Frank rejects 'Whichever movie we see will be fun' in setting where the operative standard is himself and his partner (on the grounds that no movie among the options will be fun for both of them). Suppose instead that Richard doesn't want to endorse (1). Then, pending further guidance, we have no idea at all about when we are supposed to regard belief reports as false but felicitous.

Third, in many ordinary cases where something is felicitous but false there are natural ways of indicating this. We can felicitously say that the swimming pool is a mile long, but then we can follow this up with 'Of course it is not literally a mile long'. Where such indications are not readily available, 'false but felicitous' moves will strike us as *prima facie* costly. Richard's special pleading seems to be of the latter variety.

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