

## Reply to Bach

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We are in the curious position of disagreeing with Bach about what exactly we disagree about. As we see it, his characterization of our disagreement introduces largely irrelevant terminological issues; and these in turn cover up the fact that he simply hasn't replied to our central criticism. We start with two failed attempts to characterize the disagreement, and then move on to what is central.

### *First Failed Characterization of Disagreement: Propositionalism*

Bach thinks our fundamental disagreement is over something he calls Propositionalism. He says:

- (1) C&L accept Propositionalism, the fancy version of the old grammar school dictum that every complete sentence expresses a complete thought. C&L suppose that if a sentence doesn't express a proposition on its own, it needs the help of context.

We, supposedly, endorse (1), whereas Bach does not. That, according to Bach, is the clash. Note, however, that when he attributes (1) to us – the allegedly central premise in all of our arguments – he provides not a single reference to *IS*. There's a simple reason for this: nowhere in *IS* do we endorse (1). Not a single argument in *IS* depends on our endorsing or rejecting (1). We can remain neutral on that issue. Bach seems to think our alleged endorsement of (1) is what *explains* (or underlies, in some tacit way) our disagreement with him. It is not. The source of our disagreement with Bach is the arguments we give in *IS* (and spell out below) – and not an underlying commitment to anything like (1).

### *Second Failed Characterization of Disagreement: Incompleteness without Context Sensitivity*

Bach also attributes to us a commitment to (2):

- (2) Sentences cannot be semantically incomplete without being context-sensitive. Or:  
If a sentence is semantically incomplete, it is context-sensitive.

We're not sure what he has in mind here. We think it is something like (3):

(3) If a sentence's semantic content is non-propositional, then an appeal to context is required to determine a complete proposition.

We *do* endorse (3) (at least for the cases Bach has in mind when he talks about propositional radicals), though no argument in *IS* depends on our doing so. Indeed, as far as we can tell, Bach also endorses (3). He never suggests anything *other* than context (broadly construed) takes interpreters from a propositional radical to a proposition. So, there's no disagreement about (2) so interpreted. More generally, we just don't see how his talk of incompleteness as a 'form of context sensitivity' has any bearing at all on this debate, except as a purely terminological proposal. That said, there are real disagreements between us.

*Real Disagreement: The Slippery Slope of Incompleteness*

At the centre of Bach's theory is his conviction that the semantic content of a range of sentences is what he calls *propositional radicals*; these are 'incomplete' propositions (Bach 1994).<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 5 of *IS*, we argue there's no principled way to determine when a well-formed sentence expresses a propositional radical and when it expresses a complete proposition. This is our central disagreement with Bach. We argue that all the reasons he provides for thinking 'Nina had enough' expresses a propositional radical (not a complete proposition) should lead him to say 'Nina had enough pasta' expresses a proposition radical (not a complete proposition).

Why is this important? Not because of a bizarre preference for the view that 'Nina has had enough' expresses a proposition. We couldn't care less. What we *do* care about is how to avoid Radical Contextualism – a view that holds *all* sentences fail to express (complete) propositions, i.e. all sentences are incomplete in Bach's sense. He thinks only some are, e.g. 'Nina has had enough'. He denies 'Nina has had enough pasta' is. Radical Contextualists disagree. They claim that Bach's arguments for *some* sentences being

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<sup>1</sup> Bach objects to our talk of 'incomplete propositions', he says: 'Sentences, not propositions, can be complete or incomplete, depending on whether or not their semantic contents are propositions. An incomplete proposition is no more a proposition than a sentence fragment is a sentence or a rubber duck is a duck.' This strikes us as an entirely terminological issue, one on which Bach apparently has changed his mind. In his (1994), he says: '(1) and (2) illustrate two different sources of propositional incompleteness: constituent and structural underdetermination. In (1) an additional propositional constituent is needed to complete the proposition...' This is just one of many examples from that article. If he now wants to avoid 'incomplete propositions', that's fine; we were discussing his view using his earlier terminology.

incomplete generalize. We are very much interested in how to avoid siding with the Radical Contextualist. We have a choice:

- i. Find a principled distinction between ‘Nina has had enough’ and ‘Nina has had enough pasta’, i.e. a criterion by which the former is incomplete and the latter complete; or
- ii. Endorse the view that both express propositions.

If you abhor Radical Contextualism, these are your *sole* options. We are aching for Bach to reveal to us how to implement proposal (i), but he won’t. Absent a revelation, we must either embrace Radical Contextualism or endorse (ii). Since Radical Contextualism is incoherent, we opt for the latter.

Nothing in Bach's reply helps us with our choice. Here are three passages where he tries to respond to the challenge:

It is not easy, as I have pointed out with a variety of examples, to determine which sentences are semantically complete and which are not. But this does not suggest that all are or that there is no distinction to be drawn.

This passage reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the dialectic. The claim is that the considerations and intuitions Bach invokes in defense of the incompleteness of ‘A is ready’ generalize. We, and the Radical Contextualists, claim Bach's examples generalize. In §4 of his reply Bach presents our concern. But *nothing* he says there responds to the worry.

He gets a bit closer to answering us when he says:

The issue is whether any such question *has* to be asked and answered for a proposition to be yielded, albeit one goes beyond the sentence’s semantic content.

We agree (though, of course, this isn't the only relevant question, but put that aside). He continues:

It has to only if the sentence is semantically incomplete, in which case what the speaker means, assuming this must be a proposition, *has* to go beyond sentence meaning.

This is the closest Bach comes to providing a criterion for isolating incomplete sentences. He seems to be saying: *A sentence is incomplete just in case what the speaker means has*

*to go beyond the sentence meaning.* This, of course, raises the question of what it is possible for speakers to mean. As far as we can tell, there's no answer to this question other than: *You can't mean a proposition radical. What a speaker means must be a complete proposition.* But if that's his reply, we're locked into a rather tight circle: Draw the complete/incompleteness distinction by an appeal to what speakers can mean; Characterize what speakers can mean by an appeal to the complete/incomplete distinction.

To see how dubious this is, compare the following cases: According to Bach, 'Nina has had enough' is incomplete (and cannot be speaker meant) while 'Nina has had enough pasta' is complete (and can be speaker meant). Here's why Radical Contextualists deem this distinction bogus: they ask us to compare the following kinds of cases:

- She's buys food wholesale for an import firm: she's bought 689 tons of pasta the last week. She's had enough pasta.
- She's an investment banker, who buys pasta futures; she's had enough pasta.
- She's a chef making a dish that consists of pasta, seafood, and cheese. She's had enough pasta.

The Radical Contextualist claims there's nothing all these cases have in common. So, 'Nina has had enough pasta' is incomplete as stands; Nina can't have had enough pasta *simpliciter*. Now ask: does it help to be told that a speaker can mean *that Nina has had enough pasta*, but not *that Nina has had enough*? Of course not! Anyone who's convinced, for reasons given above, that 'Nina has had enough pasta' fails to express a complete proposition, will also be convinced you can't mean *that Nina has had enough pasta simpliciter*. That follows directly from its being incomplete. Anyone who thinks S is incomplete will also think this is a reason for thinking that what the speaker means must go beyond the meaning of S.

In sum: incompleteness leads to contextualism, 'like marijuana to heroin or masturbation to blindness'. And the solution, as Nancy Reagan saw years ago, is simple: Just say 'No'!

*Postscript on an Inconsistency in Bach's Position: Propositionality of Complement Clauses*

Bach endorses principle (B):

(B): If the semantic content of a sentence is capable of being true or false, a possible content of thought, and the possible content of an assertion, then that sentence expresses a proposition; otherwise, it expresses only a proposition radical.

This strikes us as blatantly inconsistent with Bach's advocacy of incompleteness. The following are meaningful sentences:

- a. Jack claims that Nina has had enough.
- b. Jack believes that Nina has had enough.
- c. Jack doubts that Nina has had enough.

If (B) were true, then either 'Nina has had enough' should express a proposition or (a)-(c) are false. The claim that they are false is clearly counter-intuitive and would be in need of extensive justification. So, we don't see any way in which (B) can be endorsed by Bach.