

## Minimalism for Dummies: Reply to Cappelen and Lepore

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### **ABSTRACT**

In my commentary on Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore's aptly titled book, *Insensitive Semantics*, I stake out a middle ground between their version of Semantic Minimalism and Contextualism. My kind of Semantic Minimalism does without the "minimal propositions" posited by C&L. It allows that some sentences do not express propositions, even relative to contexts. Instead, they are semantically incomplete. It is not a form of contextualism, since being semantically incomplete is not a way of being context-sensitive. In their reply to my commentary, C&L seem to miss this point. Exaggerating the force of their slippery slope argument, they continue to suppose that contextualism is the only alternative to their version of minimalism. They contend that I haven't replied to their central criticism, but in fact they haven't replied to mine.

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Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore's *Insensitive Semantics* is largely an assault on Semantic Contextualism and, indirectly, a defense of Semantic Minimalism.<sup>1</sup> The main point of my commentary was that they conflate semantic incompleteness (not expressing a proposition) with context sensitivity (having a semantic content that varies with context). As a result, their version of Semantic Minimalism needlessly adheres to Propositionalism, the conservative dogma that every indexical-free declarative sentence expresses a proposition. I offered Radical Semantic Minimalism as an alternative. It allows that some sentences are semantically incomplete – their semantic contents are not propositions but merely “propositional radicals.” Unlike C&L's brand of Semantic Minimalism, the radical kind is not encumbered by the counterintuitive claim that sentences that seem not to express propositions actually do. C&L think that sentences like ‘Herman is ready’ and ‘Ernie is late’ express “minimal propositions.” Considering, as C&L are well aware, that everyone else is mystified by these minimal propositions, I hoped that they would be delighted to be able to do without them without having to capitulate to contextualism. My optimism was unfounded.

In their response C&L say they disagree with me about what exactly we disagree about. They think that how I characterize our disagreement renders it irrelevantly terminological. They also think I haven't replied to their “central criticism.” In fact, our disagreement is more than terminological, and I have replied to their central criticism. They are unsatisfied with this reply, even though it exactly parallels their reply to the central criticism that their readers have leveled against their own view. Not only that, they seem to miss the main point of my commentary, that Minimalism does not have to be saddled with Propositionalism. Seeing this requires appreciating that being semantically incomplete is different from being context-sensitive.

Unfortunately, C&L still don't see the difference. If they did, they wouldn't say, as they do in their reply, that “incompleteness leads to contextualism,” and they wouldn't conflate arguments for the semantic incompleteness of some sentences with incompleteness arguments for contextualism (60ff).<sup>2</sup> More importantly, they would appreciate why semantic minimalism can do without minimal propositions. As I explain in my commentary, this would not undercut what they regard as the main idea behind Semantic Minimalism: “the semantic content of a sentence S is the content that all utterances of S share. It is the content that all utterances of S express no matter how different their contexts of utterance” (143). However, as Radical Semantic Minimalism implies, this content needn't always add up to a proposition. So there is no need to say, “That there is a proposition semantically expressed is presupposed by any coherent account of linguistic communication” (144). Rather, the semantic content of a sentence is, as Scott Soames puts it, “the least common denominator ..., what is common to what is asserted by utterances of [the

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<sup>1</sup> This reply responds to C&L reply to my contribution to a forthcoming *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* symposium on *Insensitive Semantics* (all page references here are to this book). My commentary, “The Excluded Middle: Semantic Minimalism without Minimal Propositions,” is available here:

<http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach/Cappelen&Lepore.pdf>

C&L's response to it may be found here:

<http://folk.uio.no/hermanc/docs/BachPPR.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> This is probably why in their book they mistakenly call me a contextualist (24, 34, & 36).

sentence] in all normal contexts in which it is used literally.” That is so “whether it is a complete proposition or not.”<sup>3</sup> So, this least common denominator needn’t itself be asserted.

In their reply C&L misrepresent the dialectical situation. Yes, I do say that along with contextualists they suppose:

- (1) a. that every complete sentence expresses a proposition (this is Propositionalism, a fancy version of the old grammar school dictum that every complete sentence expresses a complete thought), and,
- b. that IF a sentence doesn’t express a proposition on its own, it needs the help of context.

This is, of course, is a big ‘IF’. C&L strongly disagree with contextualists as to how many sentences need the help of context. Radical contextualists think that virtually all sentences do,<sup>4</sup> moderate contextualists think that a great many sentences do, and C&L think that only those containing indexicals do – and indexicals are limited to those in C&L’s “Basic Set” of context-sensitive expressions.” I reject Propositionalism. I think that many sentences fail to express propositions, even relative to contexts. In their reply, C&L misconstrue me as claiming that (1) is “a central premise in all of our arguments.” I didn’t say it is. They complain that “nowhere in IS do we endorse (1). But I didn’t claim that they do. Rather, they implicitly assume it. Otherwise, why would they suppose that sentences that are not context-sensitive must express minimal propositions? Why else would they repeatedly speak of “the proposition” expressed by a given sentence and insist that a T-sentence for an indexical-free sentence automatically gives its truth condition? Nowhere do they consider the possibility that a sentence can fail to express a proposition without being context-sensitive. That they speak of my “talk of incompleteness as a ‘form of context sensitivity’” (I say no such thing) suggests that they don’t see the difference.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, C&L insist that “not a single argument in IS depends on our endorsing or rejecting (1).” Here they miss my point. The point is not that they assume (1) in their arguments but that they overlook a version of Semantic Minimalism that does without it and without the minimal propositions that their version requires. The real bone of contention between us is whether or not any sentences *are* semantically incomplete. The reason they think they need to deny that any are is that they are convinced that conceding that some sentences are semantically incomplete leads one down a slippery slope. For the grounds that lead one to concede this will in consistency force one to admit that all or virtually all sentences are semantically incomplete.

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Soames, “The Gap Between Meaning and Assertion: Why what we literally say often differs from what our words literally mean,” in M. Hackl and R. Thornton, *Asserting, Meaning, and Implying*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming), ms. pp. 3 & 4.

<sup>4</sup> In her forthcoming “Minimalism versus Contextualism in Semantics,” Emma Borg identifies a prominent form of radical contextualism that C&L overlook. It is *not* characterized by the claim that (almost) all lexical items in a language are context-sensitive, for the issue here isn’t how many expressions beyond those in C&L’s “Basic Set” should be added to that set. As she points out, “many contextualists do not think of all context sensitivity as on a par with that displayed by members of the Basic Set. Rather they hold that there are some contextual effects which cannot be traced to any element in the grammatical form of a sentence.” This can be so, on this version of radical contextualism, even if the sentence expresses a proposition (by virtue of the contents of its constituents and how they are put together syntactically).

<sup>5</sup> C&L endorse the claim that “if a sentence’s semantic content is non-propositional, then an appeal to context is required to determine a complete proposition,” and say that I endorse it too. But if the sentence is not context-sensitive, then this proposition can only be what the speaker means in uttering the sentence. That’s irrelevant. The question is whether a sentence that is not context-sensitive must express a proposition, not whether what a speaker means in uttering a semantically incomplete sentence must be a proposition. Obviously, facts about the context must be taken into account to figure out which proposition that is.

Unfortunately, C&L don't mention, much less respond to, my reply to their slippery slope argument. Rather, they wonder what makes a sentence semantically incomplete, e.g. in the case of (2), which they think expresses the proposition and has the truth condition given in (2\*).

(2) Steel isn't strong enough.

(2\*) 'Steel isn't strong enough' expresses the proposition that steel isn't strong enough and is true iff steel isn't strong enough.

They lament that "The only answer we have been able to discern, beyond just appeal to brute intuitions, is this: [(2\*)] fails to ascribe truth conditions to [(2)] because it doesn't answer questions such as, Strong enough for what?" (61). But the possibility of asking further questions is always there, whether a sentence expresses a proposition or not. As I explained (in connection with C&L's 'John went to the gym' example), although further such questions can always be asked, the issue is whether an answer is needed to yield a proposition. Once a proposition is determined, further questions may still need to be answered, but only in order to determine what the speaker means in uttering the sentence.

What, then, is C&L's "central criticism"? They insist that we have a choice between (i) finding a principled basis for distinguishing sentences that are not semantically incomplete sentence from more elaborate ones that are, and (ii) endorsing the view that both sentences express propositions.<sup>6</sup> They then proclaim, "If you abhor Radical Contextualism, these are your *sole* options." Their central criticism is that I haven't provided a "principled" basis, a "criterion," for deciding whether or not a given sentence manages to express a proposition, something capable of being true or false. They're right. Such questions have to be settled on a case-by-case basis and what they're asking for is a general criterion. However, the lack of a general criterion doesn't show that the distinction is bogus. After all, there is no criterion, no principled basis, for distinguishing men who are bald from men who aren't. Would C&L argue, regarding men with at least one hair on their heads, that either they're all bald or that none are? Would they proclaim that these are our sole options?

Actually, I do reply to their central criticism, though rather briefly. They ask, "what are the criteria by which one sentence is deemed semantically incomplete and another complete?" I answer, "a (declarative, indexical-free) sentence is semantically incomplete if it fails to express a proposition." Admittedly, this short answer is as unhelpful as C&L's short answer to the question what proposition (2) expresses (allegedly). Like them, I suggest that if you want a long answer, ask a metaphysician. However, I don't assume that what the sentence semantically expresses must be a proposition.

C&L are right about one thing: not all sentences are semantically incomplete. If they all were, then not a single thought could be expressed linguistically (assuming that the contents of thoughts are propositions). All thoughts would be ineffable and incommunicable (at least they wouldn't be communicable explicitly). No sentence could be used to make a thought fully explicit, since the thought would have a propositional content but the sentence would not. The less mystical view is that for any semantically incomplete sentence that is capable of partially expressing a thought, there is some semantically complete enrichment of that sentence that completely expresses that thought.

C&L are wrong to suppose that every sentence that isn't context-sensitive expresses a proposition. They're a bit complacent to be content with saying that a given such sentence 'S' expresses the proposition that S. They think it's not their problem to say which proposition the sentence expresses, and they proceed to dump that problem on metaphysicians. But if we are

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<sup>6</sup> C&L offer a singularly ill-chosen pair of examples to suggest that there is no distinction. For some strange reason they suppose that I think that 'Nina has had enough' is semantically incomplete but that 'Nina has had enough pasta' expresses a proposition. It doesn't. It fails to indicate enough pasta for what.

going to consult metaphysicians to find out which proposition a given sentence expresses, we have no business telling them that it does express one. That would be like asking the CIA to report on which type of WMD a certain dictator has. Maybe he doesn't have any.

In one case C&L actually offer the metaphysician some help. Consider the sentence 'Tommy is tall'. Suppose we're not content to be told that it expresses the proposition Tommy is tall and that this proposition is true iff Tommy is tall. C&L kindly offer us – and their metaphysical consultants – four candidates for what being tall amounts to (171). However, they point out that these candidates all have problems. Still they assume that there is a better candidate. But why assume that? Maybe their metaphysical consultants would advise them that there is no such property as being just plain tall, hence no proposition that Tommy is tall. As I pointed out in my commentary, C&L just assume that their consultants will tell them what they want to hear.

In their short Postscript, C&L suggest that my view is inconsistent. They argue that while maintaining that 'Nina has had enough' is semantically incomplete, I have to concede that sentences like (3) and (4) can be true, hence semantically complete.

(3) Jack believes that Nina has had enough.

(4) Jack claims that Nina has had enough.

Assume (3) is true. C&L argue that if the content of a belief has to be a proposition, something capable of being true or false, and a true belief report must specify the complete content of one of the subject's beliefs, then (3) can't be true. However, as I had occasion to propose,<sup>7</sup> the 'that'-clause in a true belief report need not specify the complete content of one of the subject's beliefs. So the truth of (3) does not require that its 'that'-clause have a complete propositional content. An analogous point applies to (4). (4) can be true even though it doesn't indicate what it is that Jack claims Nina has had enough of or for what. (3) and (4) can both be true because, even though they don't fully specify what the speaker means, they specify enough.

The aim of my commentary was to make life easier for C&L, by pointing out that Semantic Minimalism can do without Propositionalism. This required distinguishing being semantically incomplete from being context-sensitive. Continuing to conflate this distinction, C&L still fear that to concede that some sentences, such as 'The end is near', are semantically incomplete is to capitulate to contextualism. Semantic Minimalism can concede this without lapsing into contextualism.

I don't know about you, but I've had enough.

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<sup>7</sup> in "Do belief reports report beliefs?", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997): 215-241, and online at <http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach/beliefreports.rtf>