

The Excluded Middle: Semantic Minimalism without Minimal Propositions

PPR commentary on Cappelen and Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics*

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ABSTRACT

Insensitive Semantics is mainly a protracted assault on semantic Contextualism, both moderate and radical. Cappelen and Lepore argue that Moderate Contextualism leads inevitably, like marijuana to heroin or masturbation to blindness, to Radical Contextualism and in turn that Radical Contextualism is misguided. Assuming that the only alternative to Contextualism is their Semantic Minimalism, they think they've given an indirect argument for it. But they overlook a third view, one that splits the difference between the other two. Like Contextualism it rejects Propositionalism, the conservative dogma that every indexical-free declarative sentence expresses a proposition. Unlike Contextualism, it does not invoke context to fill semantic gaps and, indeed, denies that filling those gaps is a semantic matter. In rejecting Propositionalism, it is more radical, indeed, more minimalist than Cappelen and Lepore's brand of Semantic Minimalism. It does not imagine that sentences that intuitively seem not to express propositions at least express "minimal propositions." Radical Semantic Minimalism, or simply Radicalism, says that the sentences in question are semantically incomplete – their semantic contents are not propositions but merely "propositional radicals."

The Excluded Middle: Semantic Minimalism without Minimal Propositions

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Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore's book is ultimately a defense of their self-styled Semantic Minimalism, but it's mainly a protracted assault on semantic Contextualism, both moderate and radical. They argue at length that Moderate Contextualism leads inevitably to Radical Contextualism and at greater length that Radical Contextualism is misguided. Supposing that "[Radical Contextualism] is the logical consequence of denying Semantic Minimalism" (7), they think they have given an indirect argument for their version of Semantic Minimalism.¹ But they overlook a third view, one that splits the difference between the other two. Like Contextualism it rejects Propositionalism, the conservative dogma that every indexical-free declarative sentence expresses a proposition. Unlike Contextualism, it does not invoke context to fill semantic gaps and, indeed, denies that filling those gaps is a semantic matter. Like Cappelen and Lepore's brand of Semantic Minimalism, it rejects the very idea of pragmatic intrusion into semantic content. However, in rejecting Propositionalism, it is more radical, indeed, more minimalist than their version of Semantic Minimalism. It does not imagine that sentences that intuitively seem not to express propositions at least express "minimal propositions." Radical Semantic Minimalism, or simply Radicalism, says that the sentences in question are semantically incomplete – their semantic contents are not propositions but merely "propositional radicals."

¹ All page references are to *Insensitive Semantics*, Oxford: Blackwell (2005). I follow their typographical practice of capitalizing 'ism's.

1. Semantic Incompleteness is not Context Sensitivity

Why do Cappelen and Lepore overlook Radicalism and trumpet their own view as the only alternative to Contextualism? I think the explanation is very simple. Like contextualists, they accept Propositionalism, the fancy version of the old grammar school dictum that every complete sentence expresses a complete thought. They too suppose that if a sentence doesn't express a proposition on its own, it needs the help of context. Of course, whereas contextualists imagine that a great many (according to radical contextualists virtually all) sentences are context-sensitive, Cappelen and Lepore argue that relatively few sentences are. Two of the three basic tenets of Semantic Minimalism, as they define it, are that context has a "very limited effect" on the semantic content of an utterance and that "all semantic context sensitivity is grammatically (i.e., syntactically or morphemically) triggered" (2). They go on to develop powerful tests for context sensitivity that are flunked by various candidates that fall outside the "Basic Set" of obviously context-sensitive expressions.² Unfortunately, they don't realize that sentences can be semantically incomplete without being context-sensitive.³ This is evident from their formulation of the third basic tenet: "Beyond fixing the semantic value of these obviously context-sensitive expressions, the context of utterance has no effect on *the proposition* semantically expressed. In this sense, the semantic content of a sentence S is *the proposition* that all utterances of S express (when we adjust for or keep stable the semantic values of the obvious context-sensitive expressions in S" (2; my italics). No wonder they think minimal propositions are needed to plug the seemingly semantic gaps that context can't fill.⁴

The idea of semantic incompleteness is straightforward if you think in terms of (structured) propositions rather than truth conditions. Since these are made up of building

² Cappelen and Lepore claim that "these context sensitive expressions exhaust the extent of contextual influence on semantic content" (143). I agree, leaving aside quibbles about precisely which expressions belong in the Basic Set.

³ This is clear from the fact that they repeatedly misinterpret me as claiming that certain sentences are context-sensitive rather than semantically incomplete (24, 34, 36). Perhaps they are misled because I sometimes say that certain sentences "do not have context-independent truth conditions," which could suggest that they have context-sensitive truth conditions rather than none at all.

⁴ Cappelen and Lepore later elaborate Semantic Minimalism as the conjunction of seven theses (144-5). Since I can't discuss them here, suffice to say that Radicalism is consistent with all but those that presuppose Propositionalism.

blocks assembled in a particular way, it makes sense to suppose that in some cases such an assemblage, put together compositionally from a sentence's constituents according to its syntactic structure, might fail to comprise a proposition. I call what is thus built up a "propositional radical" to indicate that, although it comprises the entire semantic content of the sentence, it lacks at least one constituent needed for it to be true or false and to be the content of a thought or a statement (alternatively, a sentence might not be fully determinate as to logical form, e.g., as to scope).

Cappelen and Lepore distinguish three ways of being context-sensitive, but being semantically incomplete is different from all three. A sentence is not semantically incomplete because it contains any "surprise indexicals," "hidden indexicals," or "unarticulated constituents" (8-9). It needn't contain any expression that appears not to be an indexical but actually is, as has been claimed of such terms as 'know', 'flat', and 'tall'. It needn't contain a syntactically present but phonologically null variable that must have a referent (or else be quantified over) for the sentence to have a truth value. Nor is being semantically incomplete a case of expressing a proposition with a (syntactically) unarticulated constituent (it makes no sense to say that a sentence contains a syntactically unarticulated constituent). Having an unarticulated constituent is a property of a proposition relative to a sentence – having a constituent that is not the semantic content of any of a given sentence's syntactic constituents (whether or not articulated phonologically, i.e., actually uttered). But if that occurs, the sentence does not express the proposition – the unarticulated propositional constituent is not part of the sentence's semantic content. Of course, one can use the sentence to communicate that proposition, but in that case part of what the speaker means does not correspond to anything in the sentence. That's what happens whenever a speaker uses a sentence that is semantically incomplete.

Distinguishing semantic incompleteness from context sensitivity rebuts one of Cappelen and Lepore's key claims: "That there is a proposition semantically expressed is presupposed by any coherent account of linguistic communication" (144). They rightly insist that only Semantic Minimalism "can account for how the same content can be expressed ... in radically different contexts. It is the semantic content that enables audiences who find themselves in

radically different contexts to understand each other. ... It can serve this function simply because it is the sort of content that is largely immune to contextual variation” (152). I wholeheartedly agree.⁵ But all this is compatible with the radical version of Semantic Minimalism. To claim that some sentences are semantically incomplete is not to claim that they are context-sensitive but only that their contents fall short of being propositional.

2. The T-Sentence Argument for Propositionalism

Cappelen and Lepore conflate semantic incompleteness with context sensitivity because they implicitly assume Propositionalism. That’s why they think that in order not to cave into Contextualism, it’s not enough to argue that sentences like ‘Art is ready’ and ‘Bart has had enough’ are not context-sensitive (tense aside). They think they need to argue that such sentences manage to express propositions, albeit minimal ones.⁶ Their main argument for this seems to be that T-sentences can be given for such sentences (155):

- (1) ‘Art is ready’ is true iff Art is ready.
- (2) ‘Bart has had enough’ is true iff Bart has had enough.

Cappelen and Lepore evidently assume that producing a T-sentence automatically provides a truth condition. However, this just begs the question. After all, if a sentence is semantically incomplete, the corresponding T-sentence will be semantically incomplete too.⁷

⁵ I would add that contextualists imagine that if something must be added *in* the context of utterance, it must be added *by* the context, that the context somehow supplies or determines this missing ingredient. For a critique of Contextualism, see my “Context ex Machina,” in Zoltán Szabó (ed.), *Semantic versus Pragmatics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2005), pp. 15-44.

⁶ Cappelen and Lepore borrow the phrase ‘minimal proposition’ from François Recanati (“The Pragmatics of What is Said,” *Mind & Language* 4: 295-329, at p. 304), but use it differently. Recanati does not assume that every sentence expresses a proposition, but he does suppose that in many cases even when it does, this proposition falls short of what the speaker is likely to mean in uttering the sentence.

⁷ Also, when applying their Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Report Test to point out that any utterance of ‘Art is ready’ can be reported with ‘S said that Art is ready’ and of ‘Steel isn’t strong enough’ with ‘S said that steel isn’t strong enough’, Cappelen and Lepore arbitrarily assume that the semantic contents of the that-clauses of these indirect reports are complete propositions. Semantic Minimalism does not need to make this assumption, and Radicalism doesn’t. Note that a report of what S asserted must specify what Art is ready for or what steel is strong enough for (according to S), but this would go beyond reporting what S said. Here I am invoking the locutionary/illocutionary distinction, which never figures in Cappelen and Lepore’s discussion.

Unfortunately, instead of explaining what proposition a sentence like ‘Art is ready’ or ‘Bart has had enough’ expresses – giving a T-sentence doesn’t help – Cappelen and Lepore coyly pass the buck to the metaphysicians.

3. Minimal Propositions, Properties, and Metaphysics

It turns out that when things heat up Cappelen and Lepore are not afraid to stick their toes into the metaphysical waters, but that’s about it. They speculate that ‘being ready’ expresses the property of being ready and that ‘has had enough’ expresses the property of having had enough. They realize that these less than informative specifications won’t satisfy their opponents but, like a priest advising someone curious about the distinctive character of holy water to consult a chemist, they advise anyone curious about these putative properties to consult a metaphysician. But what if this metaphysical consultation revealed that ‘being ready’ and ‘having had enough’ do not express properties but, rather, property functions or something of the sort? Then Cappelen and Lepore would have to conclude that sentences like ‘Art is ready’ and ‘Bart has had enough’ do not express propositions after all.

Instead, they go to great lengths to rebut the complaint that (e.g.) you can’t just be ready but only ready for something or other. Evidently, they think that being ready is like being hungry. Being hungry is a property you can have even if there isn’t anything in particular you’re hungry for. One can utter ‘Art is hungry’ and not only say, but mean, that Art is just plain hungry. He feels a need for something to eat, of course, but that’s just what being hungry is. Feed him plenty to eat and he won’t be hungry for a while. Of course, this won’t work if he’s hungry specifically for snails, but to say that Art is hungry is not to say that he’s hungry for snails. Being ready is different.⁸ If you utter ‘Art is ready’, you could mean that he’s ready to eat snails, but you couldn’t mean that Art is just plain ready.⁹ There is no such proposition for you to mean. Cappelen and Lepore think there is such a proposition, but when it comes to enlightening us about it, they become uncharacteristically bashful.

⁸ So are being late, behind, superior, eligible, expensive, informed, etc.

⁹ Also, you couldn’t mean that Art is ready for something or other. But Cappelen and Lepore reject the suggestion that a sentence like ‘Art is ready’ expresses the proposition that Art is ready for something or other, as opposed to the (minimal) proposition that Art is (just plain) ready (97).

They are more forthcoming about ‘enough’ and the property it allegedly expresses: Consider a bunch of people who all have had enough. For example, one who has had enough wine, one has had enough turkey, and one has had enough cocaine. All these people have something in common: They have all had enough. It is true that they all have had enough of different things, but what they have in common is that they all have had enough. The metaphysical worry, then, is to determine in virtue of what is it the case that they all have had enough. That, in a nutshell, is the problem of the metaphysics of enoughness. (167n)

The question is whether having had enough is a property, indeed the one that these people all share. Obviously these people have something in common, but it’s the property of having had enough of something or other, which by Cappelen and Lepore’s own lights (see note 9) is not the property (were there such) expressed by ‘has had enough’.¹⁰

Mistakenly classifying me as a (moderate) contextualist, Cappelen and Lepore say they “need to know why Bach and other Moderate Contextualists think there’s no such thing as minimal propositions. What makes them incomplete? What are the criteria by which one proposition is deemed incomplete and another complete?” (61). This is the wrong question to ask. 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. If the semantic content of a sentence is capable of being true or false, is a possible content of thought, and is the possible content of an assertion, then the sentence expresses a proposition, otherwise only a proposition radical.

The relevant question is this: “What are the criteria by which one sentence is deemed semantically incomplete and another complete?” The short answer is that a (declarative, indexical-free) sentence is semantically incomplete if it fails to express a proposition. Admittedly, this short answer is as unhelpful as Cappelen and Lepore’s pet claim that ‘John is ready’ expresses the proposition that John is ready (if you want a long answer, ask a

¹⁰ A similar point applies to Cappelen and Lepore’s argument in chapter 10 to the effect that rejecting Propositionalism leads to *Metaphysical Nihilism*, which denies that any two things can have any properties in common, and which implies that any two different utterances of any simple subject-predicate sentence can ever express the same proposition or have the same truth conditions. That would be a problem all right. However, Cappelen and Lepore need to show (assuming that at least some properties must be expressible) that if some predicates did not express properties, none would.

metaphysician), but at least it doesn't assume that there is such a proposition for the sentence to express. 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.¹¹ But this does not suggest that all are or that there is no distinction to be drawn.

4. Is Semantic Incompleteness Contagious?

Why are Cappelen and Lepore so averse to semantic incompleteness? Because they think it leads inevitably, like marijuana to heroin or masturbation to blindness, to Contextualism. I have offered them an alternative, but they're skeptical about semantic incompleteness, as is evident from Chapter 5, "The Instability of Incompleteness Arguments." Although they bill them as arguments for context sensitivity via semantic incompleteness, these are really just arguments for the semantic incompleteness of various sorts of sentences. Anyway, Cappelen and Lepore contend that if the sentences in question are semantically incomplete, then inserting more words and phrases into them won't yield sentences that are semantically complete. That is, if there are no minimal propositions for the best candidates for semantic incompleteness to express, embellished versions of those sentences won't express propositions either.

Cappelen and Lepore address the question of what makes a sentence semantically incomplete in connection with (3) and (3*):

(3) Steel isn't strong enough.

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

As far as they're concerned, "The only answer we have been able to discern, beyond just appeal to brute intuitions, is this: [(3*)] fails to ascribe truth conditions to [(3)] because it doesn't answer questions such as, Strong enough for what?" (61). Indeed, because "We can ask questions of exactly the kind that's alleged to bring out the incompleteness" of allegedly semantically incomplete sentences about sentences that presumably are semantically complete

¹¹ See my "You Don't Say?" *Synthese* 128 (2001): 15-44, section 5.

(64), Cappelen and Lepore suppose that if some sentences don't express propositions, virtually none do.

Of course, further such questions can always be asked, but such a question is relevant only if an answer is needed to turn a propositional radical into a proposition. Cappelen and Lepore ask a number of irrelevant questions about (4),

(4) John went to the gym.

“Went to the gym how? Walked to the vicinity? Did something in the gym? Did what in the gym? For how long? What if he went into the gym but was sleepwalking? Etc. We don't know how to evaluate (4) without settling these questions, but nothing in (4)'s disquotational truth conditions would answer these questions. We hope it is obvious how to generalize this point” (65). But what *is* the point? That such questions can be asked shows only that what a speaker means in uttering a given sentence might include more detail than its context-invariant semantic content, even if the sentence does express a proposition.¹² 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. 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.

5. Minimalism without Minimal Propositions

I've acknowledged that it's sometimes difficult to tell whether a sentence is semantically complete or incomplete. Cappelen and Lepore are well within their rights to ask what makes a sentence incomplete beyond the fact that it doesn't fully express a proposition. But the important point here is that defending Semantic Minimalism doesn't require a definitive answer to this question. It concedes nothing to Contextualism to leave open the possibility that some syntactically well-formed sentences are semantically incomplete. Contextualists, by assuming Propositionalism, feel compelled to insist that context somehow completes the job that linguistic meaning doesn't finish. Cappelen and Lepore, in rightly denying that context

¹² For numerous examples see my “Speaking Loosely: Sentence Nonliterality,” in Peter French and Howard Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 25: *Figurative Language*, Oxford: Blackwell (2001), pp. 249-263.

can do this job, correctly suppose that this job does not need to be done. But the reason it doesn't need doing is not that sentences that seem semantically incomplete actually do express propositions, albeit "minimal" ones, but that they fall short of expressing propositions.

Perhaps what underlies Cappelen and Lepore's thinking here is the reasonable assumption that what a speaker means in uttering a sentence must be a complete proposition. But this doesn't have to be the proposition, if any, expressed by the sentence. If the sentence is semantically complete but, as often happens, the proposition is not specific enough to exhaust what the speaker means, what the speaker means is some embellished version of that proposition, e.g., that John went to the gym to work out; and if the sentence is semantically incomplete, the speaker *must* mean more than what the sentence expresses, e.g., that Art is ready to eat dinner.¹³ Either way, what the speaker means goes beyond the sentence's semantic content. So, from a pragmatic perspective, it's not all that important whether the sentence expresses a proposition or not.

As Cappelen and Lepore say, "The idea motivating Semantic Minimalism is simple and obvious: 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).¹⁴ This salutary idea does not need to be encumbered with the assumption that the semantic content of a sentence has to be a proposition in order to do justice to the platitude that speakers can mean different things in uttering a given sentence.¹⁵ It is just not true that "That there is a proposition semantically expressed is presupposed by any coherent account of linguistic communication" (144). Yes, only Semantic Minimalism "can account for how the same content can be expressed, ... because it is the sort of content that is largely immune to contextual variation" (152), but as Radical Semantic Minimalism says, this content needn't amount to a proposition. Radicalism lets the propositional chips fall where they may.

¹³ The first case involves "expansion," the second "completion." Because part of what the speaker means is not implicated but merely implicit, these are both cases of conversational implicature, as opposed to implicature. See my "Conversational Implicature," *Mind & Language* 9 (1994): 124-162.

¹⁴ Suitable qualifications have to be made for indexicality, syntactic ellipsis, ambiguity, and vagueness.

¹⁵ In "Context ex Machina" I suggest that this platitude is the kernel of truth in Contextualism.