Reply to Korta and Perry

PPR, 2006

Terminology vs. Substance

> In Chapter 10 of *IS* we say:
>
> A huge chunk of the current debate about these issues is distorted by a peculiar obsession with how to use the words 'semantic' and 'pragmatic.' We emphatically don't care about these terminological issues. We do, however, think the debate about these issues has reached such an elevated stage of confusion that it is advisable not to frame it in terms of the 'semantic–pragmatic' distinction. …If someone would like to use the word 'semantic' for something other than what we use it for, we're ok with that.

We're worried Korta and Perry (K&P) are trying to lure us back into a 'debate' about how to use the terms 'semantic' and 'minimalism'. We didn't use 'pragmatic' in *IS*, but we kept 'semantic' – we considered dropping it as well just in order to avoid a terminological 'debate'. Our plan was to call the level of content we focus on 'Filbert Content' (on the assumption that no prejudices surround this term). Unfortunately, it's too late to pursue that strategy.

In what follows we amplify on the terminological debate and the motivation for our choices. We then turn to more substantive issues.

Why we use 'Semantic Minimalism'

First, some trivialities about definitions that are common ground between K&P and us: Definitions of, say, 'semantic' and 'minimalist', are neither right nor wrong. They are either useful or not. The question, then, is whether our definitions are useful, given the aims of *IS*. Recall, our central opponent in *IS* are Radical Contextualists – those who claim context sensitivity is ubiquitous in natural language in this sense: If you take the standing meaning of unambiguous words, filling in the semantic values of context sensitive expressions, then *what you wind up with fails to express a proposition*. Radical Contextualists call the view they oppose, i.e. the view that you *do* end up with something propositional, 'Semantic Minimalism' (see, for example, Carston (2002), Recanati(2004), and Travis (1985, 1986, 1996). We thought, perhaps mistakenly, it would simplify communication and clarify the debate were we to adopt their terminology. Since it is *they*

who call the view they deny 'Semantic Minimalism', we thought it would be a useful and polite strategy to adopt their terminology.

> Here's how Recanati motivates his use of the term 'minimalism':
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> According to minimalism, the truth-conditional content of a sentence is not identical to its conventional meaning, but it departs from it *only when* the sentence itself, in virtue of its conventional meaning, makes an appeal to context mandatory in order to provide a value for some indexical expression or free variable in need of saturation. (Recanati (2006); see also (2004), and Carston (2002))

For Recanati, 'minimal' indicates that the level of content he has in mind is *a level of assertable content minimally influenced by context*. The notion we describe satisfies these conditions. This, we think, is where substantive disagreement with K&P kicks in.

K&P's on Semantic Content as Stable Content (1)

K&P object to our claim that the minimal semantic content of a sentence S is that which utterances of S share cross contextually. We say, '[t]he 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 are. It is the minimally shared content.' We also characterize semantic content as 'stable content'. In response K&P say:

> … C&L emphasize their broad agreement with Kaplan, so this use of 'content' is rather odd; for Kaplan the content is what *changes* with context; the character remains the same and is what is grasped by someone ignorant of context.

In a related passage, they ask about clauses (c)–(e) in our characterization of minimalism (see K&P's paper):

> What are clauses c) through e) doing in an exposition of semantic *minimalism*, a description of the 'content' that all utterances of a sentence *share*? The clauses c), d) and e) all pertain to factors the *differentiate* the content of English sentences as used by different people at different times, or with different intentions about which meanings of ambiguous expressions they wish to employ, and the standards of precisification for vague expressions. Something has gone awry, and the basic idea of semantic minimalism has slipped away.

In other words, what we call the (minimal) semantic content of S varies insofar as the semantic values of members of the Basic Set of context sensitive expressions vary; the meanings of ambiguous expressions vary; etc. So, we shouldn't say that semantic content is *stable*.

Reply to K&P's First Objection

To understand why we characterize our level of content in this way it is crucial to keep in mind the context in which it is presented – this is central to understanding the difference between K&P's view and our own. *In IS we are arguing against someone who says that every expression is context sensitive and that there is no way to guarantee contextual stability – every expression in the language is like 'I' and 'now' and 'you'* (with some difference in the manner in which the semantic value is fixed in a context of utterance). *On this view, if you fix the semantic value of the members of the Basic Set, disambiguate ambiguous expressions, and precisify vague expressions, you still don't end up with something that expresses a proposition. Our opponent adds these latter clauses because she wants to make explicit that the context sensitivity she's claim is ubiquitous is distinct from typical indexicals and demonstratives, and ambiguity and vagueness.* It is in response to this view that we say: no, there is a level of content – we call it minimal semantic content – of the kind characterized by (a)-(d) on our list. Of course, we realize that it is not stable with respect to the values of indexicals and demonstratives, ambiguous and vague expressions, etc. We took this to be obvious, given the extensive discussion of these issues in *IS*, but we now see that, taken out of context, our remarks about the stability of this level of content might be misconstrued.

Three further points on this issue:

1. We take this level of content to be important because it is the first level of content that's *propositional*: it is the sort of thing that can be asserted, claimed, believed, etc. The alternative notion suggested by K&P is, however, not assertable (or if it is, no one ever asserts it, see further discussion of this point below).
2. We also took this level of content to be important because it is can be shared by speakers across contexts (again, assuming you keep the semantic values of members of the Basic Set fixed). If 'John said that S' is true, then John said the content of S; If that content is the proposition that p, then John asserted the

proposition *that p*. It is possible for others to also assert *that p*. The alternative levels of content suggested by K&P cannot be so shared (see the discussion below).

3. Our minimal contents can be evaluated as true or false, or interesting or unjustified or…. Maybe, the alternative suggested by K&P can be as well, but never, as a matter of fact, is (see discussion below).

With that said, we are perfectly happy to agree that there are many different levels of content; and you can call those levels of content whatever you want. In Chapter 13 of *IS* we defend Speech Act Pluralism. This is the view that any utterance of a sentence S expresses a plurality of distinct propositions. This sits well with the idea that there are distinct levels of content such as those K&P call 'reflexive' contents. Perry's work can be seen as an attempt to characterize some of these levels and explain its cognitive significance. In this sense, we see Perry (2001) as directly complementary to our own. In the spirit of pluralism, we tend to say: the more the merrier.[1]

K&P on Semantic Content as Stable Content (2)

Their second objection they register is that the Radical Contextualists (and those using their terminology, e.g. C&L) have overlooked (or ignored) an even more minimal level of content. K&P have two proposals for what should be called 'minimal' content. The first (which is the one we'll focus on, though our point applies also to the second) is what Perry (2001) calls $\text{content}_{m.}$ They say:

> Let **u** be an utterance of 'I am tired' in English, the meanings of the words and the mode of composition involved are given, but not the speaker, time, etc. The Content_{m} of **u** is:
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> (1) *That the speaker of* **u** *is tired at the time of* **u**.
>
> (1) is what we call a *reflexive* content of **u**, since it puts conditions on **u** itself
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> Content_{m} gets at the vision behind C&L's basic idea: it is what all utterances of the same sentence have *in common*.

[1] This is not to say we don't have doubts about the role and function of the levels of content that Perry (2001) tends to focus on. See above.

In other words, if we were really looking for what utterances of a sentence S have in common, we should have looked at something like what Perry (2001) calls Content_m, and not what we call Minimal Semantic Content.

Here are five comments on Perry's notion of Content_m:

i. If this is about what ought to give the label 'minimal' to, we're happy to do so. We'll call our level of content, then, Filbert Content.

ii. It is common ground between our opponents and us that simple and complex expressions have characters. So, a level of content phrased entirely at the level of character is irrelevant for the debate we're engaged in. (See above.)

iii. We extremely puzzled by K&P's claim that (1) 'is what all utterances of the same sentence have in common'. Reflexive contents, such as Content_m, can never be shared by two utterance of the same sentence S: Two utterances u and u' of S will have different Contents_m because they will refer to different utterances; u will include a reference to u and u' to u'. There is no way, therefore, that Content_m can get 'at the vision behind' our basic idea. There is, of course, a general rule that tells us how to generate the Content_m for each utterance of 'I'm tried': *For any utterance u of 'I'm tried', u is true just in case the speaker of u is tried at the time of u*. But this is a rule that tells you how to generate truth conditions for particular utterances; it isn't itself a set of truth conditions for any particular utterance; its instantiations do that.

iv. Consider reactions such as: 'John said that too', 'I thought that was what you said', 'I doubt that's true'. 'That's interesting', 'That's funny'. These are never used to refer to what K&: call Content_m. We never refer to propositions *about* utterances and express agreement, disagreement, etc. about them. We might use such mechanisms to pick out propositions, but we don't treat them as the assertable contents. When someone asserts 'I'm tired' he not making an assertion about his own utterance! When you doubt what you said, or re-affirm what you've said, or change your mind, etc., the attitudes you express are not about Content_m.

v. To grasp what Perry (2001) calls Content_m, reflective contents, we need to refer to the relevant utterance. We're confused by how K&P thinks this should be done to reach the level of reflective content. In (1) and (2) in K&P's reply there's a name for the relevant utterance, 'u' and 'u'' respectively. So, is it a condition on grasping that

$Content_m$ that we have a name for the utterance? Presumably not, because later he uses expressions such as 'the note', i.e. a definite description, in presenting $Content_m$. We worry about this for a couple of reasons:

a. In some cases it seems unlikely to us that we will ever be able to have a singular term referring to the relevant utterance because we will have no idea what the relevant utterance is. Our worry can be brought out by thinking about the interpretation of written or otherwise recorded speech acts. To make things simpler, we'll tell you something interesting (i.e. this is not an example but rather a real speech act): *We think this is a good time to travel to Buenos Aires*. To grasp the $Content_m$ of this speech act, you need to refer to the relevant utterance. Ask yourself (i.e. you, the reader, should ask yourself this question): What's the relevant utterance? Here's the history of this speech act: One of us thought up the example, made some notes on a napkin, transferred those notes to his computer, sent it to his co-author; the co-author, in turn, rewrote the draft, and we went back and forth a few times. Then it went to *PPR*, then to the printer, then the proofs, etc. You get the point. There is, in such cases, no clear utterance to refer to – there's no one event that can be singled out as 'the utterance'. Hence, there's no way you can grasp $Content_m$.

b. Putting this issue aside, sometime it looks as if K&P want to allow descriptions of the relevant utterance to enter into $Content_m$, i.e. we don't need a name for the relevant utterance (they allow 'the note' to be sufficient for picking out the utterance). If this is their view, then there will then be indefinitely many $Content_m$ for any utterance u (since there are indefinitely many ways to describe the relevant utterance, each of which is non-equivalent to the other, e.g. 'the utterance that originated this token', 'the utterance that made Perry send a token to the publisher who then produced this token', etc.). There will be one $Content_m$ for each possible description of the utterance. If this is so, then two issues arise: first, there's no such thing as 'the reflective content' since there’s no such thing that is unique. Second, it is again unclear whether two people will grasp the same $Content_m$ if they utilize different descriptions of the relevant utterance.

K&P on Grasping Semantic Content

K&P says:

> Suppose you find a note **n** that reads 'I am tired.' You don't know who wrote it, or when, but you assume it is written in English. On the C&L account you *do not* grasp the semantic contribution of the sentence, for you do not have the information necessary, on their theory, to grasp 'the proposition semantically expressed'. But of course you do …

There's no substantive disagreement between us here: On our use of 'semantic content' you can't grasp it; on K&P's, you can. So, this is purely terminological. We are not denying there is a level of content characterized exclusively by an expression's character.

K&P on Reporting Indexicals with Unknown Referents

> K&P continue:
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> …and you can report it: Note **n** is true iff the person who wrote it was tired at the time he wrote it.

Ask yourself whether having found this note would you say: the writer claimed that the writer of the note was tried at the time of writing it. Of course, you *could* do this – we doubt anyone has ever done it (we know of no non-philosophical example of an indirect report where a singular term is used to refer to a particular utterance in this way, but our Speech Act Pluralism predicts that someone could do it. Again, there is no real disagreement between us.