

# METAPHOR AND MERCURIAL CONTENT

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*What is it for an utterance to have truth-conditional content? While Literalists and Contextualists attempt to adjudicate the proper domains of semantics and pragmatics, they do not adequately answer this fundamental question. I propose that both camps' concern with the determinants of meaning, and in particular with the crucial issue of indeterminacy thereof, might be better addressed by exploring a hermeneutic approach to utterance content, recognizing its inherently interpreter-sensitive character. I focus here on metaphor as an initial testbed for this proposal.*

## I. UTTERANCES AND THEIR CONTENTS

We commonly think of our ordinary indicative utterances as truth-evaluable -- we can and do evaluate them as true or false. As language users, we have an intuitive (if often unarticulated) sense for what it would take for a given utterance to be true, i.e., for the *truth-conditions* of the utterance. When evaluating an utterance for truth, we are assessing whether those conditions are in fact met; we are evaluating whether 'what is said' is in fact true.

The idea that utterances have a *basic truth-conditional content* plays an important explanatory role in contemporary theorizing of language. This content is essential to an utterance's intelligibility: it is what we fundamentally must grasp in order to understand an utterance; it is what we agree with or disagree with when we take such stands towards an utterance; etc. The basic truth-conditional content is the message that the words of the utterance *state* or *directly express* -- as distinguished from what is merely *implied* by the utterance, or other types of *secondary* contents, all of which arise from and depend upon

a prior notion of 'what is said'.<sup>1</sup> Though expressing truth-conditional content does not exhaust all of the ways in which our utterances can be meaningful -- e.g., it does not capture the non-propositional, experiential, or perlocutionary effects which utterances may have -- it does play a central role in explaining the fundamental communicative potency of language.

But what *exactly* is the relationship between an utterance and its truth-conditions? What makes it the case that an utterance has one particular basic content as opposed to another?

Much of the disagreement in contemporary semantics/pragmatics debates arises from differing views that Contextualists and Literalists have about the determinants of meaning -- and, as a consequence, about which elements of meaning 'get into the proposition expressed', about whether a candidate content is 'what is said' by an utterance or if it is merely 'what is implied' (or if it has some third intermediary status as an 'implicature' or the like), and so forth. In general, Literalists claim that the basic 'what is said' level of utterance content is principally established by the semantic composition of words' conventional literal meanings; while Contextualists claim that the determination of content, even at a basic level, is a context-sensitive and largely pragmatic affair.

Yet both camps customarily take for granted the idea that a given utterance *has* a basic intrinsic content -- established through *some* combination of literal meanings, speaker intentions, and other contextual factors. That is, they share the common assumption that

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the precise nature of 'what is said' as a technical notion is a matter of some debate; the notion of content I take up and develop here is the ordinary one attached to the saying/implying distinction.

there is a fact of the matter about 'what is said' by an utterance: they agree that there is a thing to be determined, though they disagree about how the determination goes.

What if this assumption is mistaken? What if an utterance's basic truth-conditional content is not, in fact, an objectively fixed and determinate entity?

If we wish to give fair hearing to such a challenge, it can be useful to begin by considering apparently non-prototypical uses of language, cases for which our prior theoretical commitments are perhaps less firmly entrenched; with such a focus, we may more readily judge which considerations should lead us to conclude that an utterance has a particular content, or indeed, that it has content at all.

In that spirit, the topic I investigate here is 'what is said' by a *metaphorical* utterance: What is the basic truth-conditional content of a metaphor?

## II. DO METAPHORS HAVE TRUTH-CONDITIONS?

There are two main schools of thought about what a metaphorical utterance's content consists in, corresponding to the above-noted general orientations in the semantics/pragmatics debates.

Literalists (in the Gricean tradition) characterize metaphors' significance as non-semantic: metaphors are analyzed as cases in which a speaker *says* one thing but *means* another.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Literalists take 'what is said' by a metaphorical utterance to be a

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<sup>2</sup> I intend this broad classification to group together the diverse views of figures such as J.R. Searle, 'Metaphor', in *Expression and Meaning Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979); and D. Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (1978), pp.31-47. Contemporary

function of the conventional literal meanings expressed by its words. Literalists acknowledge that such literal interpretation may seem absurd, rendering the utterance trivially false; and they grant that the anomalousness of a literal content may provoke an interpreter to search for further significance to the utterance, and even to hypothesize hidden metaphorical content which the speaker may have intended to convey. But if such metaphorical content is identified, Literalists claim that it is merely an *implication* of the utterance, it is not what the utterance has strictly-speaking *stated*; and thus, it is not relevant to the utterance's basic truth-conditions. Indeed, some Literalists deny that a metaphorical utterance can properly be said to have a 'metaphorical meaning' at all, instead characterizing metaphors' apparent meaningfulness in terms of their brute *force* -- e.g., that they induce an experiential effect of *seeing one thing as another* -- not in terms of conveyance of truth-conditional content.<sup>3</sup>

Contextualists reject this picture.<sup>4</sup> Contextualists claim that metaphorical utterances *do* have metaphorical truth-conditional contents. These contents involve pragmatically-determined 'metaphorical meanings' of the sort that speakers ordinarily intend to communicate and that interpreters intuitively understand -- they are not restricted to the

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advocates include M. Reimer, 'Davidson on Metaphor', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXV (2001); and E. Camp, 'Contextualism, metaphor, and what is said', *Mind and Language*, 21.3 (2006), pp. 280-309.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean'. For such a Literalist, metaphorical utterances may seem meaningful because of the imagery they evoke or because of the implications we read into them; but there is no metaphorical truth (in the full-fledged semantic sense) to be found there.

<sup>4</sup> What I am referring to here as the 'Contextualist' view is as an updated version of the old 'semantic' approach to metaphor as advanced by M. Black, 'Metaphor', in *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1962); or P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language* (trans. Robert Czerny) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978). Currently developed in different forms -- not all of which accept *all* of the claims I mention here -- by D. Hills, 'Aptness and truth in verbal metaphor', *Philosophical Topics*, 25.1 (1997), pp.117-153; A. Bezuidenhout, 'Metaphor and what is said: A defense of a direct expression view of metaphor', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXV (2001), pp. 156-186; F. Recanati, *Literal Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004); and Relevance Theorists such as R. Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication* (Oxford:

'literal meanings' of the expressions employed. Contextualists suggest that 'what is said' by the predicative metaphor 'X is a Z' is simply that X has whatever it takes to *count as* a Z in the context of the metaphor: we evaluate the truth of such a metaphorical utterance by determining what it would take to be a Z in the context, assigning this metaphorical meaning to the predicate, and assessing whether X actually does have what it takes -- whether X counts as a Z in a contextually-relevant way.<sup>5</sup> Contextualists maintain that this procedure is not different from that involved in the context-dependent determination of truth-conditions for literal or 'loose-talk' utterances. For each manner of speech, the content expressed by the utterance of a given expression varies across contexts as a function of pragmatic factors -- as now-familiar Contextualist examples of sense modulation and free enrichment have suggested.<sup>6</sup>

One compelling reason for siding with the Contextualists in this debate -- i.e., for thinking of metaphorical utterances as expressing distinctively metaphorical truth-conditional contents -- is that we find it natural to *affirm* or *deny* metaphorical utterances in conversation, using responses such as 'That's true!' or 'That's not so!'. In so doing, we

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Blackwell, 2002). In addition, there are semantic theories of metaphor (i.e., holding that metaphors are truth-evaluable) which are not Contextualist theories; but these theories are not my focus here.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this discussion, when I speak of 'a way to be a Z' or 'what it takes to count as a Z', I am referring to a way a subject might be in order to be called a 'Z'. That is, I am talking about variability in what the expression 'Z' can be used to refer to, not about variability in some postulated property of Z-ness; I am making a linguistic claim, not a further metaphysical one.

<sup>6</sup> In other words, the Contextualist advances a *semantic continuity thesis* about metaphorical and literal language. Metaphorical utterances directly express truths just as literal utterances do, using the same basic mechanisms of meaning, with the same potential illocutionary force. Metaphorical predications may differ from literal ones with respect to their *style* or to the *experiential effects* they provoke -- and metaphors may rely upon less *typical* ways of satisfying a predicate (e.g., of *counting as* a Z) than literal language does -- but there is no categorical difference between these manners of speech with respect to their status in forming truth-evaluable utterances. Early work on a continuity thesis is found in D. E. Rumelhart, 'Some problems with the notion of literal meanings', in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1979); more recent elaboration in C. Wearing, 'Metaphor and what is said', *Mind and Language*, 21.3 (2006), pp. 310-332. For further discussion of the stylistic differences and semantic similarities between literal and metaphorical speech, see my 'Must we be so literal?'

appear to be agreeing or disagreeing with the truth of a metaphorical content that the utterance conveys. As Richard Moran has pointed out, such affirmation or denial is appropriate only as a manner of accepting or rejecting a *propositional content* that an utterance puts forward, not as a manner of merely indicating a positive or negative noncognitive response to the imagery of a metaphor or other experiential effects it may evoke.<sup>7</sup> And as David Hills has pointed out, the fact that metaphorical content is available for a hearer to directly take up by employing *the speaker's very words* suggests that this content is 'lodged in the words' of a metaphorical utterance -- it is 'what is said' by the utterance, not merely 'what is implied' by the utterance.<sup>8</sup>

To take an example: Imagine a context in which George and his friends are discussing whether Arnold -- an ex-body-builder -- is a good candidate for governor. If George utters approvingly...

(1) Arnold is a bulldozer.

...a hearer may reply with 'That's true!' or...

(2) He certainly is!

...as a way of agreeing with the proposition...

(3) Arnold is powerful enough to dislodge any obstacle in his path.

...taking this proposition (3) to be communicated as the *metaphorical content* of George's utterance (1) ('Arnold is a bulldozer.') in this context.

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<sup>7</sup> R. Moran, 'Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force', *Critical Inquiry* 16.1 (1989), p.100; see also Wearing, 'Metaphor and what is said', p.313.

<sup>8</sup> Hills, 'Aptness and truth in verbal metaphor'; see also Bezuidenhout, 'Metaphor and what is said'.

Or a hearer may say 'That's not so!' or...

(4) No -- Arnold is no bulldozer!

...as a way of disagreeing with the proposition...

(5) Arnold has the verbal forcefulness and aggressiveness needed to win support for difficult measures.

...taking (5) to be the relevant metaphorically expressed content -- for perhaps the hearer believes that Arnold is orally weak and easily resisted, not at all bulldozer-like.<sup>9</sup>

The Contextualist notes that in such examples, the respondent is affirming or denying metaphorical content directly, using the same expressions (e.g., 'being a bulldozer') with the same metaphorical meanings as in the speaker's original utterance -- in a way that is *not* possible with merely implied content (i.e., Gricean implicatures).<sup>10</sup> George's

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<sup>9</sup> It may be tempting to analyze such cases as instances of *metalinguistic negation*, i.e., wherein it is not the truth-conditional content of the original utterance that is being denied, but rather some other property -- perhaps the propriety of the word choice. (Recall the classic examples: 'It isn't *warm* in here; it is *hot*.'; 'Those aren't *hippopotamuses*; they are *hippopotami*.'; etc. See L. Horn, *A Natural History of Negation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).) But this analysis does not quite fit the present examples. First, note that with metalinguistic negation, there is typically a second clause which involves contradicting the preceding denial of the offending material (e.g., 'I haven't *deprived* you of my cooking; I've *spared* you of it.'). pronounced with a characteristic contrastive intonation (as is consistent with the suggestion that the negating clause involves a *mention* rather than a *use* of the negated expression.) These features do not appear in the present cases of affirmations and denials, which use normal intonation, and which are typically followed by elaborating material, not contrasting clauses. Furthermore, the spirit of the present responses differs from what we find with complaints about stylistic or conversational impropriety: the interpreter who responds to 'Arnold is a bulldozer.' with 'No he isn't!' would be expected to *act* upon this judgment (e.g., perhaps to vote accordingly) as upon a truth-conditional verdict, not as upon a merely metalinguistic criticism. Finally, note that applying the metalinguistic analysis here would create an undesirable asymmetry between the affirmation and the denial cases -- for a 'metalinguistic' (or an 'echoic') *affirmation* does count as endorsement of truth-conditional content.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, a hearer *cannot* effectively reply to (1) by saying 'That's not so!' or...

(i) No he isn't!

...as a way of disagreeing with the proposition that...

(ii) George would vote for Arnold.

utterance (1) is taken to be true just in case Arnold counts as a bulldozer, metaphorically: that is what George's utterance *says*, the truth-conditional statement that it makes. When evaluating (1), we try to determine what it would take to be a bulldozer in the context, and then we assess whether Arnold is that way; we do *not* evaluate whether Arnold is 'literally' a piece of construction equipment. In effect, we create a 'customized' or *ad hoc* concept (e.g., a 'nonce sense') which represents a *contextually-relevant* way of being a bulldozer, and we treat the predicate as expressing this concept. For instance, the *ad hoc* concept we use in understanding (1) ('Arnold is a bulldozer.') may involve the features attributed to Arnold in (3) or (5) (e.g., a certain power or forcefulness, here applied to body-building and politics, rather than construction sites) -- these are the features that the truth of the utterance turns on.

This type of affirmation/denial dialogue demonstrates why Contextualists believe that metaphorical utterances do express metaphorical truth-conditional contents, even though the pragmatically-determined context-sensitive metaphorical meanings which are 'lodged in the words' of the utterance are not conventional literal meanings.<sup>11</sup> For the Contextualist, these meanings are what a metaphor's very intelligibility depends upon: to

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...because this latter proposition (ii) is communicated merely as an *implication* of George's utterance (1) in this context. The lesson from such further examples is that, unlike metaphorical content (e.g., (3)), merely implied content (e.g., (ii)) is not part of 'what is said' by an utterance: the truth of George's utterance turns on facts about Arnold's political abilities, not on facts about George's voting dispositions.

<sup>11</sup> Though there is not space to review the entire debate here, there are many other familiar reasons why a Contextualist continuity thesis is attractive. For instance: there is psycholinguistic evidence that metaphorical speech is processed in a similar manner to literal speech (R. Gibbs, *The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994); S. Glucksberg, P. Gildea, and H.B. Bookin, 'On understanding nonliteral speech: Can people ignore metaphors?' *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 21 (1982), pp. 85-98; for an opposing view, see E. Camp, 'Metaphor in the Mind: The Cognition of Metaphor' *Philosophy Compass*, 1.2 (2006), pp. 154-170.); the phenomenology of metaphor comprehension is 'direct', 'unreflective', and has an 'immediacy' and 'transparency' common to literal speech (Bezuidenhout, 'Metaphor and what is said'; Recanati, *Literal*

understand a metaphorical utterance is to grasp its basic metaphorical content, to recognize what it takes for the metaphor to come out true.

### III. PRAGMATICS AND INDETERMINACY

Literalists consider this to be a dangerous suggestion. Literalists are anxious to maintain a privileged role for relatively fixed and relatively discrete conventional literal meanings in our understanding of utterance content.<sup>12</sup> They believe that many linguistic phenomena demand a systematic explanation of the sort which can only be provided by postulating semantic mechanisms; they characterize Contextualists as relying too heavily on the overgeneralizing cauldron of pragmatics to explain communication.

Specifically, Literalists argue that any approach which does not take conventional literal meanings as the fixed anchor for determining utterance content will be hopelessly *unconstrained*. This challenge comes in many forms. For instance, Josef Stern charges that pragmatic analyses generate an unmanageable proliferation of *ad hoc* concepts, leaving us unable to account for the fact that we often feel that the same concept has been

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*Meaning*; S. Guttenplan, 'Contextualism, metaphor, and what is said', *Mind and Language*, 21.3 (2006), pp. 333-359); and so forth.

<sup>12</sup> The Literalist explanation of linguistic communication rests on two foundational ideas: (a) that literal meanings are what we learn when we learn expressions in our language; and (b) that it is through the predictable compositional assembly of these meanings, via the coordination of syntax and semantics, that we are able to create and understand an infinite variety of novel sentences. The Contextualist suggestion is seen as a potential threat to this story. For if we admit that metaphors manifest the type of flexibility of meaning which Contextualists propose, it may be hard to resist generalizing this analysis to literal utterances with apparently context-sensitive meaning; and once we allow that the content of our ordinary literal utterances is largely shaped by pragmatic intrusions, then the celebrated achievements of compositional truth-conditional semantics may seem less explanatory of linguistic communication -- for utterance content will turn out *not* to be simply a function of the algorithmic combination of words' conventional literal meanings.

referred to on two different occasions.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Jason Stanley charges that Contextualist accounts 'overgenerate' in incorrectly predicting that a wide variety of combinations of predicate meanings would be acceptable to language users, when in fact many such *ad hoc* combinations are intuitively deemed infelicitous, and can be shown to be semantically ill-formed.<sup>14</sup>

But the deeper worry here goes beyond a concern about the efficacy and legitimacy of pragmatic explanations of felicity phenomena. The present disagreement concerns whether the very idea of *metaphorical* truth-conditional content is compatible with our understanding of what it is for an utterance to determinately express a proposition. Literalists suggest that metaphorical content is afflicted with a special and unwelcome form of *indeterminacy* (akin to the familiar Quinian and Davidsonian varieties), which renders it unfit to play the role of 'what is said' by an utterance. Metaphorical content cannot provide a firm basis for truth-evaluability, they argue, for its variability and open-endedness would yield unacceptable unclarity about the proper truth judgments of metaphorical utterances. This, then, is reason to resist the Contextualist suggestion that such content is *directly expressed* by an utterance in the traditional sense -- i.e., the sense in which truth-conditional content determinately captures the conditions under which an

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<sup>13</sup> J. Stern, 'Metaphor, Literal, Literalism', *Mind and Language*, 21.3 (2006), pp. 243-279. Stern is concerned that with Contextualist accounts, '...we arrive at any number of different *ad hoc* concepts among which we cannot clearly distinguish one from another,' (p.256); for criticism, see my 'Josef Stern and the Crisis of Literalism'. There are echoes here of the objections raised by Semantic Minimalists that Contextualists cannot handle 'samesaying' cases due to their unobtrusive individuations; see H. Cappelen and E. Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); and for responses, J. Hawthorne, 'Commentary on *Insensitive Semantics*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming (2007).

<sup>14</sup> This general argument strategy against Contextualists is probably most familiar from the 'binding argument', as in J. Stanley, 'Semantics in context', in G. Preyer (ed.), *Contextualism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005). It is also a more or less explicit premise in many related theories of hidden indexicals and the like.

utterance is or is not true -- as opposed to being merely *implied* or otherwise communicated by the utterance.

To see the worry here, recall the Contextualist claim that the basic truth-conditions of a metaphorical utterance of the form 'X is a Z' are constituted by whatever it takes for X to count as a Z in the present context: the utterance is true if X is a Z in a contextually-relevant way. Contextualists suggest that the 'contextually-relevant way' to be a Z is 'lodged in the words' of the utterance in the form of an *ad hoc* concept -- it is not simply determined by the literal meaning of the expression 'Z'. But here the indeterminacy problem looms: for there seem to be many *different* such pragmatically-shaped concepts we could conceivably form, each of which has some claim to being reasonable and relevant in a context. Which way to be a Z -- which candidate truth-conditional content - - is the one which the utterance's truth actually turns on?

For instance, consider again the alternative truth-assessments of George's utterance (1) ('Arnold is a bulldozer.'): does the truth of this utterance turn on whether Arnold is sufficiently physically dominating (e.g., (3)) or sufficiently verbally aggressive (e.g., (5))? The Literalist observes that a number of different features associated with the metaphorical predicate may reasonably be proposed as 'the relevant way' in which the utterance should be understood and evaluated. If two body-builders are within earshot of George, one of them might express agreement with (1) by taking up the proposition (3) and responding...

(6) That's true! He can lift huge weights that others cannot even budge.

Whereas if two political pundits overhear George's statement, one of them might express disagreement with (1) by taking up the proposition (5) and responding...

(7) That's not true! He is a timid and underwhelming public speaker.

In ordinary conversation, either of these responses may seem acceptable as assessments of George's metaphorical utterance. Even though they apparently have opposed verdicts, the respondents here might be in complete agreement about Arnold's actual characteristics (e.g., physical strength paired with verbal weakness). However, they take the utterance (1) -- picked out as the referent of 'that' in each response -- to express different contents, thus yielding different truth assessments.

Or consider Romeo's much-discussed utterance:

(8) Juliet is the sun.

Alternative possible interpretations of this metaphor have been articulated in a wide range of paraphrases:

- (a) Juliet is 'warm, sustaining, comforting, perhaps awesome... something on which we are utterly dependent...' (Simon Blackburn);
- (b) Juliet is 'dazzling... the center of (his) world...' (Lynne Tirrell);
- (c) Juliet is 'glorious...(but) she may blind and burn you if you come too near her...' (Liz Camp).

Each of these on its own may seem a reasonable approximation of the truth-conditional content of Romeo's metaphor. Thus, any of these might be taken up by Romeo's interpreters in agreeing or disagreeing with his utterance. For instance, Mercutio may take up Romeo's words and reply...

(9) No she isn't!

...as a way of disagreeing with the proposition that Juliet is supremely beautiful -- for perhaps Mercutio has a lower estimate of Juliet's attractiveness. But alternatively, Benvolio might reply to Romeo by saying...

(10) Yes, she sure is!

...as a way of assenting to the proposition that Juliet is dangerous to pursue. (Perhaps, valuing peace over romantic preoccupations, Benvolio is more concerned with the potential risk that Juliet represents than with competing estimates of her beauty -- after all, Romeo is slinking around in his enemy's orchard in the middle of the night.)

The problem which the Literalist raises here is that such alternative interpretations reflect distinct propositions, which may not all be true simultaneously: being dazzling is not the same as being comforting, and being dangerous is not the same as being dependable -- Juliet could be one without being the other. It is not difficult to imagine one interpreter vehemently disagreeing with another about any of the particular elements of these paraphrases, since they articulate potentially inconsistent claims. In the course of such disagreements, the disputants will accuse each other of *not really understanding* Romeo's utterance -- they have different ideas about what truth-conditional content that metaphor is expressing when uttered in that context.

The Literalist argues that this problem will inevitably arise from the Contextualist suggestion that we release the traditional assumption that words carry their standing conventional literal meanings -- and not pragmatically-determined metaphorical meanings -- across different contexts of utterance. Without conventional literal meanings

as our authority, they worry, we will have lost our moorings entirely for adjudicating possible interpretations of an utterance.<sup>15</sup>

This way of developing the Literalist objection is potentially quite powerful, as it threatens to undermine the main consideration which motivates the Contextualist position to begin with. Recall (Section II) that it is just such examples of affirmations and denials in ordinary dialogues which Contextualists take as evidence that metaphorical content is directly expressed by metaphorical utterances. But now the Literalist has drawn our attention to the fact that these forms of response may reflect a diversity of contents for a single metaphorical utterance; whereas if we stick with conventional literal meaning as the guide to content, no such unwelcome diversity arises. This observation, then, suggests that any alleged metaphorical content should be understood as merely an implication or other type of secondary message communicated by an utterance: the plurality of possible options disqualifies metaphorical content from playing the role of *the* basic truth-conditional content of the utterance; for that role, a single determinate content is required, if it is to be what utterance truth determinately turns on. The Literalist concludes that communicating metaphorical meaning is, if anything, a more impressionistic affair.

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<sup>15</sup> Though here it is presented in the jargon of the Literalist/Contextualist debates, the difficulty of identifying a single satisfactory paraphrase of a metaphor has been a long-recurring theme of objections to the notion of 'metaphorical meaning' -- most famously in Davidson, 'What metaphors mean', and defenses of this view such as Reimer, 'Davidson on metaphor'. The challenge which 'the *range* of possible metaphorical interpretations' poses for attempts to provide a semantic treatment of metaphor is concisely articulated by E. Borg, 'An Expedition Abroad: Metaphor, Thought, and Reporting', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXV (2001), pp. 227-248. Indeed, some Literalists have even proposed that this threat of unclarity is sufficient to substantiate a norm to prioritize literal speech over metaphorical speech -- since metaphors inherently seem to lack a desired determinateness. See Camp, 'Contextualism, metaphor, and what is said'; and criticism in my 'Must we be so literal?'.

#### IV. SPEAKER INTENTIONS AND FALLIBILITY

Contextualists do not find these challenges persuasive. Contextualists are prepared to discount the importance of literal meaning in determining utterance content because they have an alternative story available for how this determination takes place: they believe in the constraining power of pragmatics, and especially of speaker intentions, to settle the matter. Indeed, this belief that pragmatic factors do the lion's share of the work in establishing communicatively-relevant meanings is at the root of Contextualists' broader claim that an expression only has truth-conditional content in a context of utterance.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the Contextualist response to the Literalist challenge is simply to deny the allegation of indeterminacy. The Contextualist allows that the above examples (e.g., (9) vs. (10)) indicate how different interpreters may have different *opinions* about what proposition is expressed by a contested metaphorical utterance; but this only shows that some interpreters are *mistaken* about the utterance's content, not that the content is actually indeterminate. For the Contextualist, pragmatic factors *do* fix the meanings of expressions in a context of utterance -- there is nothing 'unconstrained' about this common phenomenon.

For example, in the above case of Romeo's disputed utterance, Romeo himself might weigh in on the question. He may reject some of the paraphrases and accept others, perhaps recognizing them as part of what he intended -- or even as something that he had not previously thought of, but is happy now to endorse after the fact. After all, Contextualists suggest, it seems right to grant that as the speaker of the utterance, Romeo

has authority over the meaning he expresses, and the truth claim he makes. While there may be unclarity or openness about what a word *could* be used to mean, the *actual* meaning is fixed by a speaker in a context when the word is spoken; responses with alternative interpretations which do not respect this intention are simply incorrect.<sup>17</sup> Thus, by taking speaker intentions as the decisive pragmatic factor in determining utterance content, the Literalist indeterminacy challenge could be deflected.

However, Literalists are rightly reluctant to accept this response. While it seems to sidestep the threat of indeterminacy, it does so by requiring that we abandon our natural understanding of the above examples as acceptable responses to the original utterance -- i.e., as manifesting different ways that interpreters may reasonably make sense of an utterance. The Contextualist explanation essentially resorts to an *error theory* of interpreters' understandings of an utterance in order to explain away the problematic data; as such, it fails to explain our actual conversational practices. The Literalist reminds us that we should only take such a step as a last resort.

In ordinary conversation, we do not always assume that a speaker has overriding authority in determining what his utterance means. Interpretation of a metaphor, or of any utterance, is not 'restricted to an elaboration of what its author is taken to have understood by it,' as Moran has explained.<sup>18</sup> A speaker cannot definitively vest his

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<sup>16</sup> This way of articulating Contextualism is most clearly sounded by Recanati -- e.g., 'Only in the context of a speech act does a sentence express a determinate content...'; Recanati, *Literal Meaning*, p.6 -- but can be found across Contextualist theories.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Wearing explicitly articulates this argument: she claims that the correct *way of counting as a Z* for a given context is settled by speaker intentions (within limits established by the conversation, the standing meanings of words, and such); 'Metaphor and what is said', p.325.

<sup>18</sup> Moran, 'Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force', p.107. For further discussion of 'the degree of autonomy metaphorical meaning has from speaker intentions...' see Borg, 'An Expedition Abroad' p.232.

utterance with a particular content any more than he can definitively vest a stone he places on a trail with a particular significance (say, as a cairn): the speaker may have a content in mind, or he may intend to appeal to conventions for how his words (or his stone) may signify; but once he releases his utterance (or his stone), its actual significance on an occasion of interpretation will be what it is then taken to be. As the above examples show, hearers often can and do read more into utterances than speakers intend, evaluating utterances in consideration of how they imagine the utterance may be reasonably elucidated.<sup>19</sup>

The gulf between the truth-conditions which a speaker intends to convey and those which his utterance actually carries in an interpretive context can be considerable.<sup>20</sup> The very idea of a speaker *failing* to say what he means depends upon this conceptual possibility. This is commonly acknowledged in the analytic literature in discussions of externalism (e.g., wherein content is seen as determined by the world in ways beyond a speaker's intentions or intensions), and also around cases of misdescription and

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<sup>19</sup> That is: what conversationalists are agreeing or disagreeing with when responding to an utterance need not be what the speaker hoped his words would mean when he uttered them. Hills captures this idea nicely by describing the 'oracular' quality that utterances may have: 'Oracular utterances (are) utterances in which a speaker speaks to an effect she herself doesn't yet fully understand, in the hope that what her utterance properly conveys is something she can and should mean, once she has discerned what that is...'; D. Hills, *The Pleasure of Ulteriority: Four Essays on Verbal Metaphor* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2004), p.52/268. A more hermeneutic rendering of this point: 'One should be able to understand an author better than he understood himself...The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience... the meaning of a text goes beyond its author... (or at least) it is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all...'; H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 197), p.297.

<sup>20</sup> We should be wary of neo-Griceans' too hasty reduction of utterance meaning to speaker meaning here. An utterance is an independent entity unto itself, the product of an event of uttering -- it is not the same entity as the intention of the speaker who speaks it, just as it is not the same entity as the sentence type it tokens. An utterance is a sentence spoken in a particular context and possibly interpreted in many others; its content may reflect influences from any of these sources. Thus, understanding the speaker's intentions is not the same as understanding the utterance.

malapropism (e.g., in which there is an explicit distinction between what a speaker intended to say and what was actually said by his utterance).

For example, if George seeks to commend Arnold for his commitment to family values, George might malapropically proclaim...

(11) Arnold understands the importance of bondage between a mother and child.<sup>21</sup>

...intending to express the proposition that Arnold understands the importance of a strong bond between a mother and child. But then a hearer, believing Arnold to be free of any bondage-endorsing beliefs, could reasonably respond...

(12) That's not true! Arnold is does not advocate bondage in any form.

In such a situation, we do not necessarily consider the hearer to be 'mistaken' about the truth-conditional content of George's utterance (11); rather, we may see this as a prototypical case of a speaker's utterance not having the meaning he intended.<sup>22</sup>

In any event, deferring to speaker intentions would not help us resolve our indeterminacy woes in all cases -- for speaker intentions themselves often have a kind of indeterminacy. To revisit our earlier example (8) ('Juliet is the sun.'): Romeo may reject the whole lot of proposed paraphrases of his metaphor, denying that he intended to convey any such determinate thoughts; the term 'sun' may simply have come to mind for

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<sup>21</sup> To borrow a phrase from Dan Quayle.

<sup>22</sup> Malaprops and misdescriptions are typically analyzed as involving something *screwy* about a speaker's communicative plan: e.g., a speaker (often inadvertently) intends to mean something by a term which that term is not conventionally used to mean, and fails. For instance, this is the analysis advanced by M. Reimer, 'What malapropisms mean: a reply to Donald Davidson', *Erkenntnis*, 60 (2004). Whether or not we agree with Reimer (see my 'Davidson's Intentions and Reimer's Conventions' for a critique), or find the hearer's response here unhelpfully uncooperative, the important point is that the very possibility of questioning what the utterance *itself* means in a context -- as distinguished from what the speaker intends for it to mean -- is sufficient to undermine the Contextualist's present suggestion.

him and seemed fitting, free of any elaboration that might illustrate or justify this intuitive sense (e.g., 'I just said that she is the sun. *That's all.*'). Perhaps Romeo feels that it is up to each interpreter to figure out on their own terms what it takes for Juliet to be the sun -- that it is not a question we need to *settle*.<sup>23</sup>

Yet even in such cases when a speaker has no particular *way of being a Z* in mind when uttering 'X is a Z', conversationalists can and do project some such condition onto the utterance for the purpose of evaluating its truth -- as the above examples show -- regardless of whether the utterance is literal or metaphorical. Reflection on this phenomenon reminds us that we should not be too quick to take speaker intentions as uniquely dispositive in determining utterance content.

## V. THE DILEMMA

But now we are left with a puzzle. The Contextualist's natural explanation of the affirmation/denial dialogues suggests that metaphorical meaning really is lodged in the words of a metaphorical utterance, and that metaphors really do express truth-conditional

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<sup>23</sup> By analogy: in adjudicating what to make of an utterance's content in cases of misdescription or malapropism, it is sometimes stipulated that the speaker's *higher-level intention* to conform to the conventions of our language should guide us -- e.g., using Kripke's well-known identification of semantic reference with the speaker's 'general intention' to use a designator in a certain way. For instance, Reimer argues that malapropisms should be understood in this way (see n22): they carry their conventional literal meanings, *because* those are the ones to which the speaker ordinarily intends to conform; Reimer, 'What malapropisms mean', p.333.

But if we accept this kind of stipulation, then we should also consider the possibility that we may as well defer to the speaker's higher-level intention to participate in our ordinary practices of social negotiation and construction of meaning. That is, we may view an ordinary speaker as intending to have his hearers interpret his utterance in ways relevant to their contexts -- including their unique beliefs, interests, purposes, and even idiolects -- or, as hermeneuts would put it, intending to have his hearers *truly understand* his utterance. (A prototypical case here is the formal utterances of legislators who write law with the explicit intention that it will be interpreted in different future circumstances in a manner appropriate to the cases then at hand.) This is the basis of the proposal I elaborate in Section VII.

content (Section II). However, as the Literalist points out, there are many different reasonable candidates for what exactly this content is, reflected in the diversity of truth-evaluative responses which are possible -- an indeterminacy that makes metaphorical meaning hardly seem 'lodged' at all (Section III).

The Literalist accepts the indeterminacy examples at face value -- as demonstrating the actual range of metaphorical interpretations which are possible for a given utterance - - and concludes that so-called 'metaphorical content' is essentially different in kind from basic utterance content. But in order to sustain this position, the Literalist must abandon our intuitive understanding of the affirmation/denial responses as direct reflections of the truth-conditions of an utterance. Disregarding these intuitions may seem implausible: do we really want to claim that the response (4) ('No -- Arnold is no bulldozer!') is *not* a denial of the basic proposition that the metaphorical utterance (1) ('Arnold is a bulldozer.') puts forward? What business are truth-evaluative responses such as (7) ('That's not true!') in, exactly, if not that of responding to truth-conditional statements? The very form of the example response, and the emphatic tone in which it may be delivered, weighs against accepting such a counter-intuitive claim. Indeed, such responses are central examples of the broader phenomenon of utterance truth-evaluability -- of how conversationalists assess utterance truth -- which our conception of utterance truth-conditional content should explain.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Corroborating evidence for the truth-evaluability of metaphors can be found by observing the *embeddability* of semantically-relevant metaphorical content. In the domain of moral language, Geach famously argued that noncognitivist analyses of moral statements face difficulty in accounting for the evident truth-conditional contributions of such statements in embedded logical constructs. A similar argument challenges any non-Contextualist view which claims that metaphors lack directly expressed propositional contents. Such a view will have difficulty explaining metaphors' evident contributions to the antecedents of conditional statements, e.g.,...

By contrast, the Contextualist accepts the affirmation/denial examples at face value -- as demonstrating that metaphorical truth-conditional content is directly expressed by a metaphorical utterance -- and concludes that the diverse evaluative responses cited by the Literalist are misleading. But in order to sustain this position, the Contextualist must resort to an error theory about our ordinary understanding of the Literalist's examples. We ordinarily find diverse responses (e.g., (6) or (7)) to a metaphorical utterance perfectly acceptable: neither respondent would be criticizable for their interpretation and response, even if they ignore or overrule the speaker's intention. As argued in Section IV, an utterance is not like a flashcard -- it does not have a single correct interpretation somehow inscribed on the flip side by the speaker's intention.

This, then, is our dilemma. Each of the existing camps in the debate feels forced to discount the significance of the linguistic evidence which the other advances. But we may be reluctant to resort to this tactic; we would like to develop a position which accommodates the intuitive understanding of *all* the examples. How might this be done?

## VI. FINDING TRUTH IN INDETERMINACY: MERCURIAL CONTENT

I suggest that the key to resolving this dilemma lies in questioning the assumption that the content of an utterance is determinately established in the context of utterance.

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(i) If music be the food of love, play on...  
...and to belief reports, e.g.,...

(ii) Romeo believes that Juliet is the sun.

The most natural explication of these examples is that the metaphorical phrase contributes a truth-conditional content to the larger utterance: (i) issues an imperative which should be followed if it is *true*

Consider again how the dilemma arises. Contextualists claim that a metaphor's truth turns on the primary subject having *some* features associated with the metaphorical predicate (e.g., there is *some* way that Juliet must be to count as the sun). When we agree or disagree with a metaphor, we are evaluating whether the primary subject actually is *that* way (e.g., we may disagree that Juliet really is so beautiful or comforting). And then the Literalist challenge becomes: *Which* way is actually the one that matters?

However, there is something curious about a *Literalist* advancing such a challenge -- for the same question may be raised for non-metaphorical utterances as well. Recall our example (1) ('Arnold is a bulldozer.');

but now suppose that George had saved himself a syllable and spoken literally, calling Arnold a 'bully' instead of a 'bulldozer'. The same indeterminacy we found above (e.g., (3) vs. (5)) would remain -- e.g., is it Arnold's intimidating physicality or his verbal aggressiveness that is at issue? -- but presumably a Literalist would not take this as reason for questioning the truth-conditional status of *literal* content.<sup>25</sup> Regardless, the question still stands: if one interpreter holds that we should only consider Arnold to be a bully if he really is physically dominating, while another interpreter believes that being verbally aggressive is sufficient qualification, which of these ways of being a bully matters to the truth of the utterance? Is Arnold really a bully or not?!

But now the question starts to sound queer. Why must we assume that there is a single objective fact of the matter here?

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that music counts as the food of love, metaphorically (in the relevant context); and (ii) attributes to Romeo a belief that is *true* if Juliet counts as the sun, metaphorically (in the relevant context). (See references, n7.)

<sup>25</sup> That is: While the Literalist claims that the 'open-endedness' of metaphorical content renders it unable to function in the ordinary way we expect truth-conditional content to function, this claim is weakened when

I think of this assumption as a relic from the Literalist tradition; it need not be part of an evolving Contextualist sensibility. Of course there may be straightforward facts about how on a specific occasion a specific interpreter *does* take an utterance and evaluate it for truth: in ordinary conversation, we do take different ways of being a bulldozer (or a bully) to matter; and these specific ways are articulated in our evaluative responses when we cite the features which qualify or disqualify the subject in our view (e.g., (5) 'I disagree that Arnold is a bulldozer... he lacks the verbal aggressiveness needed to win support for difficult measures.').

But this only shows that interpreters do not *treat* utterances as hopelessly indeterminate or opaque; rather, interpreters assign to utterances whatever degrees and dimensions of determinate content are necessary for current purposes. The catch is that no *particular* content seems objectively *inherent* to the utterance -- as the above examples show, different contents are assigned by different interpreters in different interpretive contexts.

Given this explication of the phenomenon, it begins to look as though a diagnosis of indeterminacy is not quite accurate. Perhaps utterance content is not so much *indeterminate* as it is *mercurial* -- an entity which changes faces on different occasions.

The thought here is that the most constructive response to the lingering Literalist worry is not to *deny* the appearance of indeterminacy, but rather, to *embrace* it as essential to the phenomenon under study. Our task need not be to eliminate the intuition that a plurality of responses may be possible, but rather, to explicate further the kind of

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we observe that open-endedness is just as much a quality of literal meanings as metaphorical ones. See Bezuidenhout, 'Metaphor and what is said: A defense of a direct expression view of metaphor', p.172.

phenomenon we have encountered here and how it arises -- and what it tells us about the nature of utterance content.

## VII. THE HERMENEUTIC STEP: INTERPRETER-SENSITIVITY

I wish to explore here the possibility that there is no perspective-independent fact of the matter about what it takes for a metaphor to be true -- i.e., about *which way* the primary subject must be to count as satisfying the predicate -- even though *some* such way of being does factor into the intuitive truth-conditions. Various hearers of a metaphorical utterance may each have in mind their own favored features of the predicate, which they take to be essential to the utterance's truth-conditional content. What I would like to suggest here is that we may ascribe *to the utterance itself* any one of these candidate contents which is appropriate in a given interpretive context.

To put this idea more formally: I propose to move beyond standard Contextualism to the view I call *Hermeneutic Contextualism* (HC). HC holds that the basic truth-conditional content of an utterance is *interpreter-sensitive*: there is no single perspective-independent fact of the matter about 'what is said' by an utterance; different interpreters in different contexts may legitimately judge a single utterance -- whether metaphorical or literal -- to have different contents.

Adopting the HC view allows us to resolve our dilemma. On this view, metaphorical meaning is indeed 'lodged in the words' of an utterance -- i.e., it is part of 'what is said', consistent with the Contextualist claim of direct expression -- but it is so lodged only *temporarily*, on an occasion of interpretation; this allows for the plurality of possible

evaluative responses which Literalists cite. (To clarify again: that a metaphorical meaning is indeed *lodged* is suggested by its availability for explicit affirmation or denial; and that a given metaphorical meaning is only lodged *relative to an occasion of interpretation* is suggested by the variation in reasonable but incompatible paraphrases that may be offered on different occasions.) For a given interpretative context, the utterance content *takes on* whatever degree and dimension of determinacy is required: a *local code* is effectively established for using the metaphorical expression in a fully truth-conditional manner but with a potentially novel contextually-relevant content.

The important insight of the standard Contextualist approach is that pragmatic factors -- i.e., as opposed to strictly linguistic knowledge of syntax, semantics, and conventional literal meanings -- have a considerable effect on our understanding of utterances. These pragmatic factors determine what would be reasonable or unreasonable interpretations of an utterance in a given context. For instance, it would *not* seem acceptable for either the body-builders (in (6)) or the political pundits (in (7)) to take George's utterance (1) as a statement about Arnold's slow bulldozer-like speed of driving ...

(13) (?) No he isn't! Arnold drives at the same speed as everyone else.

...since driving speed is not particularly relevant to either the body-building or the political themes of their contexts. Such a response seems like a non-sequitur: it is infelicitous because it fails to pick up on a *contextually-appropriate way* to be a bulldozer -- and it is pragmatic considerations, involving contextual relevance and general world knowledge, which make it so.

But standard Contextualism fails to appreciate that it is in *interpretive* contexts that these factors are operative -- in the interpretive acts of hearers -- not in *utterance*

contexts. By making this distinction, the HC approach illustrates *why* it should be that pragmatic factors are so important in the determination of utterance content: it is *because* the phenomenon of utterances bearing content is a product of interpreter activity, and interpreters themselves call upon pragmatic considerations in this activity, that pragmatics plays a large role in establishing truth-conditions.<sup>26</sup>

This approach for resolving the present dilemma has further motivation beyond the demands of the current examples. In particular, the claim that utterance content is interpreter-sensitive is consonant with the broader conception of meaning developed in the hermeneutic tradition. In this tradition, meaning is not seen as a frozen objective entity, fixed forever at the time of coinage or authorship. Rather, meaning is seen as a mercurial entity which is partially created (and continuously recreated) by interpreters through the act of finding significance in what has been previously uttered. Understanding an utterance involves understanding how it may be relevant or applicable to one's particular circumstance and experiences; as these circumstances and experiences vary, there will be corresponding variations in the interpretations which are developed.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In other words: HC seeks to clarify the sense in which pragmatic factors 'do work' in determining utterance content on any Contextualist account. From the HC perspective, this is a straightforward descriptive claim about the actual thoughts and actions of ordinary interpreters in making sense of an utterance -- i.e., in *determining* the content of the utterance. In this light, the pragmatic factors which standard Contextualists cite are best understood as simply a subset of the more general range of hermeneutic pressures which bear on the actual interpretive life of an utterance.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, traditional methodological hermeneutics addresses the question of significance of entire works -- e.g., works of art, or literature, or law. But the hermeneutic perspective on meaning can also provide important insights for analytic theorizing, if we apply its principles regarding full-scale works to the study of individual linguistic utterances -- recognizing them as entities which may be put into play and made meaningful through the act of interpretation as much as in their original speaking.

This conception of meaning can also be found in our ordinary folk understanding of the notion of *significance* as observer-sensitive: we take objects and events to be significant *to someone*; we do not suppose (upon reflection) that they have an absolute significance intrinsically. This is cause for entertaining the possibility that truth-conditional content itself may be similarly relativizable.

From an analytic perspective, one way of understanding this claim is to see it as an answer to the question of what kind of a property 'having truth-conditions' might be. I am claiming that this property of an utterance is more like 'being funny' or 'having aesthetic appeal' than it is like 'being loud' or 'having a particular syntactic structure'. An utterance's truth-conditional content is something of a *secondary* property, inherently observer-dependent -- analogous to the *appearance* or *value* of an object, as opposed to the objective *size* or *shape* of an object. Both Literalism and standard Contextualism assume that utterance content must be a single discrete entity, fixed forever at the time of utterance; yet we are not tempted to make the analogous assumption that the humor or aesthetic appeal of an utterance are so fixed.

In sum: With the HC approach, we can keep the Contextualist insight that the determination of utterance content is primarily a pragmatic affair, while not keeping the errant assumption that there is a perspective-independent fact of the matter about content determined for all time on the occasion of utterance.

## VIII. OBJECTIONS

There are a number of objections which talk of Hermeneutic Contextualism tends to provoke. There is not room here for extensive discussion of these, but it may be useful to quickly sketch the types of responses which could be elaborated in defense of the view.

First Objection: Isn't there more to being true than being judged to be so? Even if an interpreter *judges* that an utterance is true (e.g., 'Yes, Arnold certainly is a bulldozer!'), that does not show that the utterance *really is* true.

HC is not a theory of Truth, i.e., a theory of the nature of truth, of what truth consists in; I am not suggesting a projectivist or relativist approach to truth here. HC is a theory about truth-conditions, about one aspect of utterance significance: it claims that an utterance's truth-conditional content is interpreter-sensitive. *Given* a truth-conditional content, there may be a perspective-independent fact of the matter about whether *that proposition* is actually true. That is, once we have determined *a contextually-relevant way* of being a Z, it may be an objective question whether X is in fact *that way*. Realists about truth can be Hermeneutic Contextualists; we can accept non-relativized objectivity about truth-values without accepting non-relativized objectivity about truth-conditions.<sup>28</sup>

Second Objection: Is HC claiming that it is simply up to the interpreter to choose which content to ascribe to an utterance? The worry here is that HC may be confusing the content that an utterance is *judged* to have by an interpreter with the content that it *actually* has. Does HC abandon the notion that an interpretation can be *incorrect*?

HC does claim that the content of an utterance is what we take it to be -- but only when we are well-informed and well-intentioned hermeneutically-responsible interpreters. I am not suggesting that simply taking an utterance to have a content makes it so; some takings are *legitimate*, and others are not.

HC acknowledges that interpreters are subject to normative pressures, of both hermeneutic and instrumental varieties, which constrain how they may correctly and

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<sup>28</sup> It may be possible to develop an alternative explanation of the Literalist examples of diverse evaluative responses by taking up the approach of recent theories of truth-relativity; see J. MacFarlane, 'Making Sense of Relative Truth', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105 (2005), pp. 321–339; A. Egan, J. Hawthorne, B. Weatherson, *Epistemic Modals in Context*, in *Contextualism in Philosophy*, G. Preyer and P. Peter eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 131–170. But many theorists find the relativization of truth itself implausible; see my 'Hermeneutic Contextualism and the Knowledge Predicate' for discussion of the tradeoffs between such views and HC.

effectively ascribe content to utterances. In one interpretive context, it may be important for an interpretation to respect the intentions of the speaker, in order to assess whether he spoke responsibly; but in another, it may be more important to adopt the most typical meaning of an expression, to best anticipate its public reception; and in a third, it may be more important to bring out a less common meaning, one that captures the particular information relevant to immediately pressing circumstances.<sup>29</sup>

For example, we observed this type of hermeneutic variation earlier when considering alternative possible interpretations of Romeo's utterance (8) ('Juliet is the sun'). Mercutio and Benvolio each interpret the utterance in a legitimate manner with respect to their concerns and interests in their respective contexts. Yet their interpretations ((9) and (10)) crucially differ: Mercutio is more attentive to the romantic impulse in Romeo's actual thoughts, while Benvolio is more occupied with his own worries about the danger of the enterprise. Neither interpreter has made a *linguistic* mistake here: it is possible to be mistaken about the syntactic structure of an utterance, just as we may mishear a word or misgauge a pitch; but the utterance's *truth-conditions* are not the type of property that can be misperceived in this way.<sup>30</sup> Rather, the interpreters' disagreement arises because they have different perspectives, and they have each performed reasonable and legitimate interpretations relative to their own perspective.

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed, we may grant that in *some* contexts, the legitimate way to take an utterance may in fact be to defer to speaker intentions; see n32. But this only shows that Intentionalism may be reformulated as a special case of the hermeneutic view: it is the appropriate interpretive strategy for some contexts, but not for all contexts. In art theory, literary theory, legal interpretation, and any number of other disciplines, debates continue to play out regarding the proper roles for authorial intention and interpreter judgment in identifying and developing the significance of human works, as we attempt to find viable alternatives to the 'intentional fallacy'. HC simply reconnects the study of utterance content to this broader enterprise.

<sup>30</sup> See my 'Must we be so literal?' for critique of the assumption that truth-conditions can be simply derived from semantics. If the notion of truth we are considering here is our ordinary notion -- that which we believe in, argue about, care about -- the kind of correctness that concerns us is a more humanistic affair.

In other words, we are not dealing with an unconstrained relativism or objectionable subjectivism here; hermeneutics is a principled business. Interpreters who violate hermeneutic pressures are criticizable: their interpretations seem mistaken, and we call them *incorrect* (recall (13)). But we should not reason from the fact that there are such pressures on interpretation to the conclusion that there is a single perspective-independent correct content for an utterance -- that would be a fallacy. (That *P* is judged to be an incorrect interpretation of *U* does not entail that *U* has exactly one correct interpretation.<sup>31</sup>) HC holds that an interpretation of an utterance is correct when that interpretation satisfies the demands upon it in its particular hermeneutic situation. Thus, since the pressures on interpretation vary across contexts with our varying purposes, it may be correct to ascribe different contents to a single utterance on different occasions.<sup>32</sup>

Third Objection: We have strong intuitions that there is *one single objective* content for an utterance. If two people are *genuinely disagreeing* about the truth of an utterance, isn't it counter-intuitive to claim that they can both be right?

Two people may disagree about whether an utterance is true for many reasons. They may share an understanding about what the truth-conditions of the utterance are -- i.e., about the way things must be for the utterance to be true -- and disagree that things are really *that way*. Or the source of their disagreement may be prior to this: they may have

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<sup>31</sup> By analogy: the criticizability of a particular analysis of a work of art does not entail that there exists one correct objective analysis of the work's meaning. Similarly in the case of individual utterances: we do not have good reason to believe that there is some single candidate for '*the* content' in ordinary cases that can satisfy all constraints simultaneously for all occasions. If the objector here continues to feel a lingering sense that there is *something more* to being the content of an utterance than being legitimately judged to be so, the burden is on the objector to say what that something more might be.

<sup>32</sup> What the active interpretive pressures actually are in a given context is the subject matter for a methodological hermeneutics of single utterances. With the HC view (i.e., that 'correctness' of interpretation is a matter of meeting whatever interpretive standards are in force in a given context), it may turn out that an Intentionalist or Textualist approach is the best account for a particular case. Developing

different views about what the truth-conditions of the utterance are in the first place. (Recall the above disagreements between Benvolio and Mercutio as interpreters of Romeo's utterance.) This is still a 'genuine' disagreement, often turning on important consequences of the opposing views -- as we see in contemporary debates about whether the situation in Iraq counts as a 'civil war', whether a fetus counts as a 'person', and other similarly charged cases. Indeed, there are even genuine disagreements which originate at a level prior to the determination of content, concerning which hermeneutic pressures are appropriate to a given interpretive occasion -- as exemplified, for instance, by debates between Intentionalists and Textualists in legal interpretation.

It is true that it seems unintuitive to imagine that two parties can have different views about what an utterance's content is and both be correct. But that restriction only holds when both parties are in the same hermeneutic situation -- for then the same hermeneutic pressures will obtain, constraining what content may be correctly ascribed. HC does respect the intuition that a particular ascription of content may be *the right one* in a given interpretive context; in this sense, the appearance of determinacy may be upheld. But often we are not in the same hermeneutic situation with other interpreters, and differences in our contextual purposes, interests, and information may give us legitimately different views of what the content is. In these cases, we may look to a form of perspectivism to supply the desired normative constraint that goes wanting when we release our folk objectivity about utterance content.<sup>33</sup>

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principles to guide this determination is important work to do; but I am not proposing any particular principles on that front here.

<sup>33</sup> By analogy: think of two observers of an object reporting on its appearance from the same perspective (in which case it is odd to say they may disagree and both be correct) versus from different perspectives (in which case they may well disagree and both be correct). We may need to be tutored to realize that an

## IX. CONCLUSION

Contextualists make a strong case for the claim that metaphors do have truth-conditions. When we agree or disagree with a metaphorical utterance, we are articulating our belief that it expresses particular conditions -- via contextually-appropriate *ad hoc* meanings -- and that these conditions are or are not satisfied.

But once we accept a Contextualist analysis of the pragmatic factors shaping 'what is said', it may appear that there is considerable indeterminacy in precisely which truth-conditional content to ascribe to a metaphorical utterance -- leading us to question what it is for an utterance to *have* such a content.

I have proposed that the right response to this concern is not a rejection of the Contextualist view, but rather a refinement of it into a somewhat more hermeneutic variety which emphasizes the interpreter-sensitive aspects of meaning. The sense in which an utterance *has* a content is that interpreters legitimately *take it* to have that content; thus, it can be correct to ascribe different contents to a single utterance on different interpretive occasions. Such is the Hermeneutic Contextualist thesis -- challenging the standard Contextualist and Literalist assumption that 'what is said' by an utterance is perspective-independent. By adopting a hermeneutic approach, HC presents

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utterance's content is a relativistic property -- perhaps by examining cases in which we naturally speak of an utterance meaning one thing to one person and another to another. But tutoring is also required in other domains when an 'unobvious higher degree thesis' is advanced (e.g., we may need to be tutored to realize that an object's motion is a relativistic property, dependent upon the perspective of the observer). Our untutored intuition that there is a single correct ascription of content to an utterance is mistaken -- as we are often mistaken in believing that our own perspective provides the only right view -- but our intuition that a particular content should be ascribed to the utterance *given our context* need not be abandoned.

a more thoroughgoing Contextualism, acknowledging the essential dependence of meaning upon the interpreter and the consequent mercuriality of utterance content.

The arguments presented above focus on the case for HC as an account of *metaphorical* utterances' content. But there are reasons to suspect that the considerations raised here in support of the view are also relevant to the analysis of literal utterances. As described in Section II, Contextualists have developed independent arguments for the continuity of literal and metaphorical language; and the ubiquity of figurative and context-sensitive speech in ordinary language has been increasingly recognized in recent years. Further, the special type of mercuriality of content described here may be identified in literal and metaphorical speech alike -- as we saw, for instance, in the parallel analyses offered for metaphorical 'bulldozer' and literal 'bully' predications in Section VI. In addition, there is reason to believe that a HC analysis is suitable for cases of *prototypical* literal speech, such as ordinary knowledge attributions: as has been argued elsewhere (see n28), whether an epistemic subject counts as 'knowing' something (literally) may depend upon elements of the *evaluator's* context.

Of course, work remains to be done to substantiate this continuity claim, and to respond to various objections to HC more thoroughly. But I hope this discussion is sufficient to at least recommend that path as a fruitful one to explore.<sup>34</sup>

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